

INTERZONE: TOMORROW'S SCIENCE FICTION . . . TODAY!

INTERZONE

ISSUE 201

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

A SENSATIONAL NEW NOVELLA BY

RICHARD CALDER

OTHER NEW SCIENCE FICTION BY

PAUL DI FILIPPO

ELIZABETH BEAR

LAUREN MCLAUGHLIN

JESSICA REISMAN

A kind word from *Serenity* writer Brian Pendreigh: 'As a race, sci-fi fans make Klingons seem like regular, laid-back guys, only better-looking and often with clearer complexions' David Langford's News & Gossip

NICK LOWE ON SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

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BOOK REVIEWS



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WE ARE NOT ALONE: SF MAGAZINE ROUND-UP



◆ 04

INTERMISSION

COVER ART

LEAVING THE HARBOUR
by FAHRIJA VELIC

06

HARSH OASES by PAUL DI FILIPPO
ILLUSTRATED BY VINCENT CHONG

18

SHEILA by LAUREN McLAUGHLIN
ILLUSTRATED BY KENN BROWN

24

AFTER THE PARTY (PART 1)
by RICHARD CALDER
ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID SENEAL

32

BOY TWELVE by JESSICA REISMAN
ILLUSTRATED BY STEFAN OLSEN

40

WAX by ELIZABETH BEAR
ILLUSTRATED BY IAN SIMMONS



◆ 06

◆ 04





INTERFACE

02

EDITORIAL NEXT ISSUE

04

ANSIBLE LINK

DAVID LANGFORD'S
REGULAR ROUND UP OF
SF NEWS & GOSSIP

INTERLOCUTIONS

52

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE'S REGULAR
REVIEW OF SF FILMS

56

MAGAZINES

DAVID MATHEW'S
OCCASIONAL ROUND UP
OF SF MAGAZINES

58

SCORES

JOHN CLUTE'S REGULAR
BOOK REVIEW COLUMN

60

BOOK REVIEWS



201

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INTERFACE

NEWS • EDITORIAL • NEXT ISSUE

We're always looking to improve.

Not just in appearance and content but in terms of the services we can offer you, the readers and subscribers, how we can encourage you to be more involved in the magazine (if you want to be) and how we can encourage potential *new* readers to become involved.

So, we'd like to introduce, with immediate effect, a new scheme whereby we can reward current subscribers for introducing new subscribers. Here's how it works: tear the yellow insert (we will make this insert less obtrusive in time, by the way, we're using all the copies we pre-printed as fast as we can) along its perforation, fill out your name and address then pass the form on to a friend who can fill out their name and address in the 'gift' section at the bottom and return it to us with payment for the new subscription. We will then reward the initiator with an extra issue for every new six-issue subscription, or an extra two issues for every new twelve-issue subscription.

We can do the same thing if your friend – or *friends*, because we don't see why we should put a limit on this! – subscribes via the website's secure server: they can give your name and address in the field marked 'shopper's reference', or even make it known to us in a quick email reply to the automatic confirmation the transaction will receive.

There's no time limit on this, it's an on-going thing. We'll put a reminder in the magazine from time to time, and amend the subscription form as soon as we can. ►



Thanks to Fahrija Velic for this issue's cover art 'Leaving the Harbour' > www.fahrijavelic.com

COMING SOON »



Elizabeth Bear's 'Wane' (the companion piece to this issue's 'Wax'), part two of Richard Calder's 'After the Party', and F. Gwynplaine McIntyre's 'Sundowner Sheila'. Plus stories by Paul Di Filippo, Dave Hoing, Will McIntosh, Jason Stoddard, David Cleary (the latest in his famous Stavan series), and much more. We also have several interviews in progress: Steve Erickson, K.J. Bishop, Captain Scarlet...

INTERZONE 202 > ON SALE IN JANUARY

'Sundowner Sheila' is illustrated by Douglas Sirois

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EDITORIAL

There are more things we'd like to offer you, but we'll introduce them gradually. Meanwhile, there's nothing wrong with a little feedback (or even suggestions of your own). For example, would you be interested in some *Interzone* merchandise? Say, a T-shirt with some SF artwork on it? Other clothing items or mugs or mouse mats or...? Let us know what you think.

One thing I suspect you would all like to see, sooner rather than later, is an improved *Interzone* website. We're working on this. In fact, we're working on *two* new *Interzone* websites. One will replace the *Interzone* pages on the TTA Press website (it will be completely different, very dynamic and include a lot more content), and the other will be run entirely by *Interzone* readers, with no interference from us. If you would like to be involved with that in any way watch this space or visit the online discussion forum now (www.ttapress.com/discus).

So soon there will be more *Interzone* stories online – not too many, just the right amount! – and as soon as we can find the time we intend to podcast them too.

As always, and as with everything, your thoughts and involvement with any of this are encouraged.

No interview this time but rest assured we have several underway: Andrew Hedgecock is talking to Steve Erickson, Richard Calder is talking to K.J. Bishop (stop press: in fact, Richard has just turned this in)...

We'll soon be able to expand coverage in our reviews section to include manga, courtesy of Sarah Ash, and videogames courtesy of Alan Fraser.

A reader suggested, on the online forum, that we could make even better use of colour by including the occasional feature on art and artists. We think this is an excellent idea and one that we'll pursue.

Meanwhile, we hope you enjoy this issue. See you in 2006.

The Editors

"The best in cutting edge crime fiction" *Ed Gearty*

"Head and shoulders above every other mystery magazine in look, content and tone" *Ellen Datlow*

"The best-looking crime magazine ever. Every aspect has been thought out with attention to detail, and executed to craftswomanlike standards" *Mystery Scene*

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SUCCESS

"One of the funniest and most honest titles to be published this year."

Independent on Sunday

...And How to Avoid It



'Do not live a day longer without this book' Nicholas Royle, *Time Out*

If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write
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Is this what a real ansible looks like?

'She pressed the coordinates into the ansible, an iron box fifty centimeters long, ornately painted with a pattern of exploding stars. Typewriter keys protruded from one side, and her stained fingers played on them.' (Paul Park, *A Princess of Roumania*, 2005) Ursula Le Guin begs to differ: 'I don't know where they get their ansibles from in Roumania, but the last model I'm familiar with is more like a large pocket handkerchief with holograms and sound effects. The Roumanian version sounds unnecessarily massive.' So there.

Christopher Priest's novel *The Prestige* is now in pre-production as a Nolan brothers film, with photography to begin in January. Author soundbite: 'Interviewed at his luxury home on the south coast of England, Mr Priest said, "Hic." Later he added, "Pass the Alka-Seltzer."'

Janet Street-Porter exposes the true horror of the British educational system: 'we make school children read Dickens and Philip Pullman...' (*Independent*, 15 Sep)

Stephen King predictably drew the highest bid of \$25,100 in an on-line auction of placement opportunities in forthcoming books: the winner gets to name a character in King's novel *Cell*. Other participants included 'Lemony Snicket' (\$6,350), Peter Straub (\$2,125), Jonathan Lethem (\$2,025), and Karen Joy Fowler (\$1,853.88).

AWARDS

British Fantasy Award: the novel winner is Stephen King's *The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*. Our editor would pout if I failed to mention the winning short story, Paul Meloy's 'Black Static' (*The Third Alternative* #40).

Prometheus (libertarian SF): Neal Stephenson, *The System of the World*.

Sidewise (alternate history): LONG Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*. SHORT Warren Ellis, *The Ministry of Space*.

Mythopoeic (fantasy) novel winners: ADULT Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. CHILDREN's Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*.



AS OTHERS SEE US

A kind word from *Serenity* writer Brian Pendreigh: 'As a race, sci-fi fans make Klingons seem like regular, laid-back guys, only better-looking and often with clearer complexions. History, however, shows that Whedon's (above) appeal can stretch beyond the intergalactic anorak and reach a much wider audience.' (*Scotland on Sunday*, 25 Sep)

Another classic opening line: 'Sometimes, when devoted fans of fantasy and science-fiction entertainment – for economy's sake, let's just call them geeks – get together...' (*NY Times*, 2 Oct)

Patrick Janson-Smith, publisher at Transworld since 1981, has deserted Terry Pratchett for J.K. Rowling. He lured Terry from Gollancz to Doubleday UK in 1998, and has now moved to the Christopher Little Literary Agency – which represents Rowling.

J.K. Rowling's sales figures can still surprise us. According to a widely-reproduced AP report, 'Rowling's fantasy series, most recently *Harry Potter and Half-Blood Prince*, has sold more than 200 copies worldwide in print editions...'

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Beatrix Potter's publisher Frederick Warne (a Penguin subsidiary) succeeded in legal action against Chinese pirates whose unauthorized translations used Potter's own artwork. Most unusually, this victory – though subject to appeal – was achieved in a Chinese court against a state-owned Chinese publisher. (*Independent*, 11 Sep)

CLOSING DOWN

Andromeda Bookshop of Birmingham closed its doors on 26 August. The original founder Rog Peyton wrote: 'All the staff had walked out, the current owners pushing them one step too far. [...] The stock is all in storage in Walsall.'

Clarecraft, UK model company best known for official Discworld® figurines, is to close at the end of October.

Jonathan Lethem (below) is one of this year's 25 MacArthur Foundation fellows, each to be encouraged in their work by a bounty of \$500,000 spread over five years. Certain snide fans suggested that getting out of sf was a smart move for Mr Lethem; this wasn't necessary, though, for our previous MacArthur recipient Octavia Butler.

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Earth Is The Alien Planet Dept. 'Driving north toward Albany on the Taconic Parkway, Parker watched both dawn and a heavy cloud cover move in from the west.' (Richard Stark [Donald E. Westlake], *Backlash*, 1998)

Colour Perception Dept. 'Two incense sticks burned in a little brass holder in front of her, sending wisps of thin blue smoke upwards which were indistinguishable in colour from the rat's nest of gray hair...' (Eugene Byrne, *ThiGMOO*, 1999)

Neat Tricks Dept. 'The animal seemed to have no face until it twisted its head round. Then it opened two enormous lidless eyes.' (Paul Park, *A Princess of Roumania*, 2005)

Hot and Cold Running Dept. 'Jean-Claude's sex ran over my skin while the fear ran like ice through the rest of me.' (Laurell K. Hamilton, *Cerulean Sins*, 2003)

R.I.P.

Don Adams (1923–2005), US comedian remembered as the inept Agent 86 in the 1960s TV spy-spoof series *Get Smart*, died on 25 September; he was 82. He also voiced the *Inspector Gadget* cartoon's title role.

Helen Cresswell (1934–2005), British author of more than 100 children's fantasies and comedies, died from cancer on 26 September; she was 71. Her best known fantasies were *Lizzie Dripping* (1973, assembling stories written for the BBC's *Jackanory*) and the Bagthorpe Saga which began with *Ordinary Jack* (1977) and became a 1981 TV series.

Philip J. Klass (1919–2005), long-time senior editor at *Aviation Week and Space Technology* and noted debunker of UFO claims died on 9 August aged 85. Some SF references confused him with the 1920-born Philip Klass who is still with us and writes as William Tenn.

Constance Moore (1920–2005), US actress and singer who co-starred with Buster Crabbe in the 1939 *Buck Rogers* film serial, died on 16 September; she was 85.

Joe Nolan, long-time Belfast SF Group fan and con-goer, died on 27 September; he was in his nineties. He assisted James White with novel research, and appears as ship-captain 'Seosadn Ui Nuallain, or Joseph Nolan' in JW's *The First Protector* (2000).

Michael Sheard (1938–2005), UK actor who became a popular figure on the SF convention circuit after appearing as Admiral Ozzel in *The Empire Strikes Back*, died from cancer on 31 August. He was 67.

Vladimir Volkoff (1932–2005), French author born of exiled Russian parents, died on 13 September aged 72. Though best known for spy fiction, he won the Jules Verne award for *Metro Pour L'Enfer* (*Metro to Hell*, 1963) and returned to sf with two 1980s novels.

Robert Wise (1914–2005), Hollywood director whose work covered many genres, died on 14 September – four days after his 91st birthday. His films included *Curse of the Cat People* (1944), *The Body Snatcher* (1945), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The Haunting* (1963), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979).



INTERMISSION

STORIES · HARSH OASES BY PAUL DI FILIPPO · ILLUSTRATED BY VINCENT CHONG

Thomas Equinas hated to run.

But now he had no choice.

He had been entrusted with the future salvation of his kind.

An egg named Sweetpea.

And the Manticore was hot on Sweetpea's trail.

Equinas contemplated the innocuous-looking egg resting now on his desk in its scrollworked mahogany cradle. A standard, stand-alone brood-pod, big as a baseline watermelon, the ivory-colored egg could have held any kind of embryo: mosaic or basal, cold-blooded or warm-blooded, vertebrate or invertebrate. No exterior sign pointed toward the unique destiny of the occupant.

A most hypothetical destiny, as yet. The embryo had first to survive to birth and live to adolescence.

About hating to run. This was both a philosophical and physical issue with Thomas. Both a figurative and literal disinclination. His pedigree included a large percentage of horse genes, and he had in the latter half of his life strived to minimize this part of his heritage. Running was part of what he abjured.

Of course, anyone seeing Thomas would have had little doubt as to his genetic composition. The large, liquid brown eyes, the stocky chest, the blunt horny feet and hands, his mane-like hair – all of these features betrayed the equine genes that consorted with the human, seal, raccoon and even avian codons in his cells.

As a young mosaic two decades ago, however, Thomas Equinas had *loved* to run. An unsophisticated healthy splice, employed on a vast African cell-phone plantation, Thomas had happily spent all his free time, after the day's round of tending to the circuit shrubs, with the other bucks and fillies, in foot races and wrestling matches, afterwards nimbly climbing gnarly booze palms to pluck the liquor nuts from on high, returning to the ground for drunken orgies, awaking with throbbing head in the fragrant, breath-humid stables to start the cycle of mindless work and pleasure all over again.

But that had been before he learned to read.

One of the basal humans tangentially associated with the plantation had gifted – or perhaps cursed – Thomas with literacy.

Her name had been Petrina, and she was a slim, blonde woman of indeterminate age who had come to the plantation to upgrade the circuit bushes one day. Her task took her a week, and during that time she was constantly out in the fields with the worker splices, sowing her upgrade viruses and checking the results of her work. During these times, Thomas had eyed her with a strange new mixture of curiosity, lust and interest. Petrina was unlike the humans who ran the plantation. She treated the splices with courtesy and genuine affection.

"Thomas, I need a random sample of antenna buds from at least six bushes separated by no more than seven meters but no less than four meters."

"Yes, Peej Petrina, right away."

"Just call me Petrina, please, Thomas."

"Whatever you wish – Petrina."

Somehow, without any intentionality on Thomas's part, he miraculously found himself rutting with Petrina one night. He had seen her standing at the flickering edge of the circle of light cast by the big bonfire that accompanied the nightly diversions of the splices, and he had gone to her, abandoning his kind for the promise of the unknown – a path he had been following ever since.

Together Thomas and Petrina moved off further into the darkness and had sex. Afterwards, lying amidst the crushed lemon grasses, Thomas could not find it within his stunned self to initiate conversation. Luckily, Petrina had plenty of questions that would loosen Thomas's tongue. She sought earnestly to learn the parameters and dimensions of his life, and eventually stumbled upon his illiteracy.

"Why, that's scandalous! Back home, all our splices can read. It's essential. That's how they improve themselves and help us more efficiently. I don't see why it's not the same here..."

"Perhaps – perhaps it's because there are so many of us here, and so few humans. You say that is not the case in your land..."

"No, not at all. In fact, even the old rough parity of one splice to one human has decreased lately, as new generations of kibes

HARSH OASES

PAUL DI FILIPPO



with higher turingosity become embedded in superior mycoflesh bodies. These aphyllumic helpers seem destined to outmode your kind, by any number of performance criteria. Already, people are referring to a period known as the Redaction, a time when splices will go extinct.”

Thomas did not understand everything Petrina was telling him, but he sensed the imminence of some doom.

Thomas dared in this intimate moment to utter a rebellious thought. “I – I would like to read, I think. But our humans seem to want to deny us anything that would bring us closer to their level.”

Petrina sat up eagerly, her breasts swaying. In the darkness, her eyes seemed to catch the glint of the many Southern Hemisphere constellations overhead.

“Why, nothing could be easier, Thomas. I’ll get a sartor to fab up a dose of literacy trope tailored to your genotype when I go into town. You’ll be reading the next day, once all the glial rewiring subsides.”

“But how will you get access to my genotype?”

“Silly horse! I’ve already got one big sample of your cells. But you can give me another if you want.”

Thomas blushed at his stupidity, but was not so embarrassed that he failed to comply with Petrina’s suggestion.

Petrina went into town the next day, but did not return immediately. Thomas almost gave up hope that she would keep her promise. But when she did show up again, she carried the promised dose of neurotropins.

Passing over the smart pill on the sly, Petrina also whispered goodbye. Thomas was too excited even to realize he would never see her again.

Thomas swallowed the tropes when out of sight of his human overseers, washing it down after his shift with a swig of booze-palm juice. Almost immediately he began to feel light-headed and confused. He left his brawling peers for the stables, where he went immediately to sleep.

When he awoke in the morning, he felt fine. And the first thing he noticed was a sign on the wall of his crib.

CAUTION: MOSAICS UNPREDICTABLE WHEN DRUNK

As the revelation that he was actually reading struck him fully, Thomas began to weep. As the deeper implications of the sign

dawned on him – that he had been wasting his life as a brutish sot – he began to weep even more forcefully.

A human overseer came by to inquire politely, “Hey what the fuck is the problem here, you stupid ’var?” Thomas pulled himself together, denied any ills, and went to work.

This was the start of his new life.

Thomas began to read omnivorously. He slyly rescued from the compost heap a cell-phone that had failed several quality-control tests but still functioned well enough for his purposes. He used it to surreptitiously download texts from the ideocosm. With each book he consumed, Thomas felt his image of the world expanding and growing richer.

Thomas came particularly to relish philosophy, seeking the why of his world as well as the what. The ancient Greeks, the Germans, the twentieth-century masters like Bertrand Russell and Bob Dylan, the mid-twenty-first-century school of neo-Nozickians – all became as essential to Thomas as food.

And when he learned of the first historically recorded splice philosopher, an individual named Modest Mouse, Thomas made up his mind to become one himself.

The path to this ambitious goal was not easy, and had taken many years of travail and suffering, years of heartbreak and setbacks overcome by perseverance and ingenuity.

Thomas and his fellows had been manumitted when the cell-phone plantation went bankrupt, in the wake of the introduction of communicator earwigs into the marketplace. This gesture was not as altruistic as it sounded, amounting merely to turning loose helpless plantation mosaics into the restored primitive veldt where they had to contend with wild basal predators. Somehow, Thomas had managed to survive and make his way to the nearest big city, Jo’burg, where he found a job as a house servant for a conservative family that disdained the new mycoflesh servitors. There, Thomas was able to continue his education, eventually even surreptitiously taking degree-level courses in the ideocosm.

After ten years, Thomas managed to compose and post several philosophical treatises in the ideocosm without revealing his true identity. They were accepted by the intellectual community. After a string of such successes, Thomas came out of the closet. A small media firestorm resulted among several granfalloon, which only had the effect of solidifying his new status. Grants and stipends followed, allowing him to abandon his lowly job. Since then, Thomas had become well established among both humans and splices, traveling around the world to speak and teach. He owned his own home now in the Republic of Snows, near Stockholm.

And it was here he sat now, contemplating the egg containing Sweet’pea.

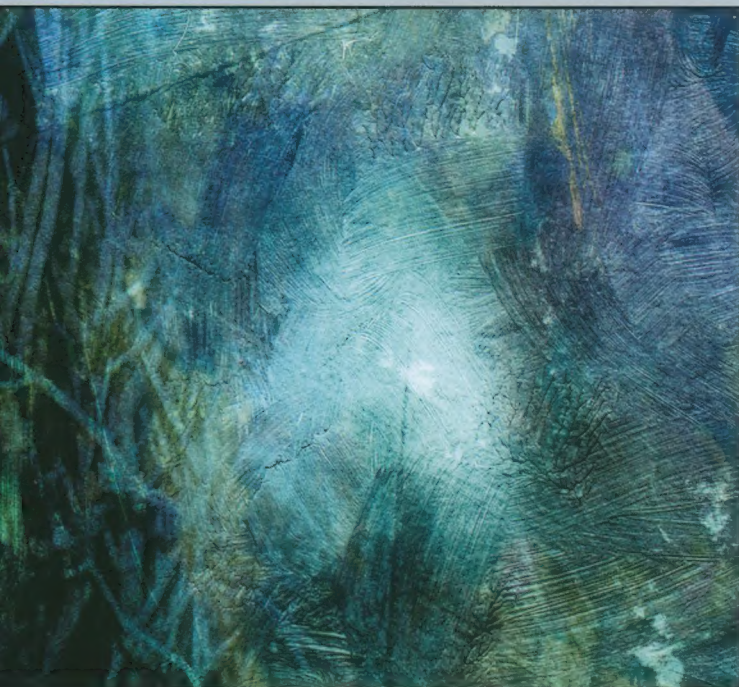
Thomas Equinas could pride himself on being a free, self-made splice, with several virtual books to his credit, respected by open-minded humans around the globe.

All because of a chance encounter with a generous woman.

The miracle of this was beyond any philosophy Thomas had yet managed to formulate.

But what good did all his personal success amount to, if his kind was doomed?

The predicted Redaction was well underway. Each year, fewer and fewer splices were being commercially bred, as soulless creations of ultra-pliable mycoflesh animated by aphyllumic artificial intelligences came to occupy the societal niches that had been the domain of the splices for well over a century. It was a mass extinction on the order



of that which had ended the Permian age. Well, okay, maybe that was stretching matters a little. But it was at least as big as the Cretaceous die-off.

Facing the end of his own inherently abbreviated natural lifespan, the elderly Thomas was more troubled by the decline of his race than by his own personal mortality.

Which explained why he had agreed to become Sweetpea's guardian.

A month ago, Thomas's servant – yes, he acknowledged the irony of employing splices in the same capacity in which he had once been employed – a badger-weasel mix named Gromo, had ushered into Thomas's study an imposing mosaic. Tall, broad-shouldered, tawny-furred, muzzle packed with teeth, the splice had announced himself as Felix Navidad.

Studying the visitor's half-familiar somatype, Thomas was shortly moved to ask, "Are you perchance any relation to the infamous Crazy Kat?"

"My great-grandfather," rumbled Felix throatily.

"I hope you do not espouse his radical beliefs."

"Not entirely. Warfare between the basal humans and we mosaics is both impractical and nihilistic. But I do believe in the preservation of our kind. Which is the mission that brings me here. A small, secret group of concerned cultivars has formulated a plan to insure that all the myriad splice genotypes survive any effort, however uncoordinated or gratuitously intentioned, to expunge them. We wish to enlist your help in carrying this scheme forward."

"What can I possibly do?"

"All our hopes and dreams are to be embedded in a unique individual whom we call the Teleological Ark. This being will need a tutor and guide until he matures. We have chosen you, as one of the wisest among us. You must raise our heir to honor and protect his lineage. Teach him to carry our glory into futurity."

Thomas pondered the breadth of this challenge. It required more energetic activity than he had been accustomed to in a long time. But what better use of his waning years could he ask for?

"I accept."

Tension flowed out of Felix Navidad's bunched muscles. "This decision relieves me. I had no wish to kill you to insure secrecy."

Thomas smiled. "I appreciate both your honesty and forbearance."

"But be warned," continued Felix, "it is possible that you will face an antagonist far less charitable than I. A segment of humanity wishes to speed up the Redaction, claiming that an earthly paradise will occur only when our world hosts but a single species. You can imagine that the favored species is not a spliced one. They call themselves the New Adamists, and they have enlisted a formidable monster to hasten the day they await. He is called the Manticore. So far, we believe, the New Adamists have no inkling of our scheme. But if they learn, then they will surely send the Manticore after you and the Teleological Ark."

"How can I possibly protect myself and the Ark from a professional killer?"

"When the Ark is a year old, he will have formidable abilities of his own. Till then, you must rely on your wits and subterfuge."

Felix recounted to Thomas then the features sartorized into the Ark. Thomas mulled them over, marveling at the ingenuity of splice-kind. The measures seemed adequate.

"I will have to leave my beloved home then?"

"So we advise. We are relying on you to find secure places to raise our prodigy."

"When will the Teleological Ark be given into my custody?"

"A month from now."

"That is enough time for me to prepare a retreat."

Felix held up a paw to forestall Thomas. "Tell me nothing. The fewer who know of your plans, the safer you will be. Goodbye, Thomas Equinas, and good luck."

The Teleological Ark had arrived, cased in his brood-pod, some weeks later. By then, Thomas had made his plans. One of the first things he had done was to rechristen the embryo in its incubator. No surrogate child of his was going to have to answer to so clumsy and determinative a name.

Thus, Sweetpea.

Now Thomas picked up the brood-pod from its cradle, holding it under one arm. "Time to leave, Sweetpea."

With Gromo carrying his few bags, Thomas made his way outside to his personal entomopter, parked on a broad lawn now summer-green. After stowing the luggage and the brood-pod onboard, Thomas turned to Gromo.

"I have established a trust to maintain this property for you and the other servants, Gromo, for as long as you live. Tend it well. Who knows, I might even return some day."

"We will miss you, Varplus Equinas. Please take our best wishes with you."

"Only the wordless support of splices everywhere gives me the strength to fulfill this mission, Gromo."

Behind the controls of the dragonfly, Thomas prepared for ascent. The entomopter began to rise, scissoring its gauzy wings.

Emerging from the bordering forest a hundred meters across the lawn, a figure was bounding toward the arm-waving Gromo. Fearing the worst, dreading what he was about to witness, knowing he could offer no aid, Thomas poured more power into the wings.

Incredibly fast, the newcomer disclosed more and more of his identity the closer he got, until finally his unique nature was undeniable.

A pugnacious, snarling human head sprouted twisted oriental dragon horns from its brow. The brawny neck merged seamlessly into a powerful leonine body covered with sharp quills. A jointed scorpion's tail writhed from the hindquarters.

The Manticore. Crafted in some dark sartorial crucible as a dedicated killing machine.

Some eight meters above the lawn, Thomas felt safe. Still, he jerked back in surprise when the Manticore made a startling leap and came within venom-spitting distance of the entomopter's undercarriage.

Thumping unharmed to the ground, the fiend took out his frustration on hapless Gromo. Enfolding the servitor in a spiny embrace, the Manticore stabbed Gromo over and over with his barbed tail, issuing a defiant roar of frustration and challenge.

Weeping for the doom he had brought on his friend, Thomas flew off toward the south.

The Manticore managed to keep pace below the entomopter for nearly a kilometer, before falling behind.

Truly, Thomas was on the run now.

He just hoped Sweetpea was worth the sacrifice.

Scyphozoa City changed location continuously, but at a gentle pace.

The buoyant undersea community consisted of some ten thousand colorful sartorized jellyfish, each as big as an aerostat hanger,

supporting jungles of tentacles hundreds of meters long, submerged in the warm, nutrient-rich Pacific waters near the Philippines. These living structures served as homes for some one million individuals.

The majority of the citizens were merpeople: basal humans modified somatically but not genomically to support an underwater existence. Thus they retained the legal genetic purity that conferred on them full enfranchisement, at the cost of some laborious postnatal kludges for each new generation. Allied with the mers were a variety of piscine splices. A smattering of short-term visitors from the airworld could always be found within city limits, accommodating themselves with various artificial devices.

Beneath the enormous pillowy cows, those tissuey inverted saucers of the coelenterates, the daily routines of the city took place. Trading, eating, discussions, education, politicking, gossip – all the standard activities of sentient life. Meanwhile, the enormous jellies maintained themselves mindlessly, insensible to their internal parasites, stinging and capturing their prey with their nematocysts, and digesting their food gastrodermally, right alongside the oblivious merpeople.

Living in Scyphozoa City was like living under acres of billowing rainbow tents abstractly tethered with numinous cables. During the daylight hours, sunlight illuminated the translucent jellyfish from above, producing breathtaking stained-glass lighting effects that tinted the residents a thousand gemlike shades. By night, the internal bioluminescence of the living city produced a more fairy-like ambiance conducive to sleep, leisure and romance.

The last-named of these activities was what occupied the interests now of a handsome merboy named Swee'pea.

Although only four months old, Swee'pea was already as big as the average merchild of thirteen years. Physiologically an adolescent, Swee'pea was less mature mentally. But even lacking many realtime years of experience, Swee'pea possessed a sharp, probing intelligence and common sense – traits engineered into him to aid his survival.

Generally happy and easy-going in his daily dealings with his fellow citizens of the submarine city, Swee'pea found his limited world a delightful place.

Of course, the instructions and advice and affection tendered to him by his dear Uncle Thomas had invaluable supplemented his

congenital wit and appreciation of life. Uncle Thomas's tutoring on matters philosophical and practical had engendered in Swee'pea an openness and curiosity about life.

But Uncle Thomas had never yet tutored him in the ways of love. And Swee'pea, urged on by deep, newly ascendant longings, was intent on learning.

Dropping down through the twilit waters below the lowest ends of the dangling tentacles, leaving the safety of Scyphozoa City above and behind for his illicit assignation, Swee'pea sent out sonar clicks to alert Snagtail of his coming. Arrowing through the water with efficient strokes and kicks of his webbed limbs, Swee'pea was soon rewarded with an answer from his potential lover.

The boy could picture Snagtail vividly. A sleek basal dolphinoid body with a corona of lively ultra-sensitive and capable squid arms around the midsection, Snagtail sported a signature notch in his back flipper.

Swee'pea had grown up side by side with the splice, and considered the male his best friend. But lately, that friendship had begun to blossom into something else. Something not generally sanctioned between humans and splices in this community.

And as far as Swee'pea knew at this moment, he was fully as human as the other mers.

From below Snagtail rushed up, a darker blackness among the dusk, as if to ram into Swee'pea, turning aside only at the last second, and coming to a stop beside the boy.

The two communicated in their common language of clicks and whistles, less information-dense than the hyperflexive sign-language employed between humans underwater.

Missed you, said Snagtail.

Missed you too, replied Swee'pea.

Want you. Want you now. No more waiting.

But how?

Don't know. Just try.

With some trepidation, Swee'pea allowed himself to drift closer to Snagtail, and soon found himself wrapped in a tentacular embrace, his dorsal side pressed into Snagtail's ventral side.

And that's when the change commenced.

Never before had such a thing happened in Swee'pea's short life.

Great waves of peristalsis traversed Swee'pea's body. Internal organs shifted, exterior forms flowed into new configurations. Cradled in the many arms of his friend and lover-to-be, Swee'pea found himself morphing in protean fashion, until at last he resembled his partner down to the signature defective fluke.

And resonating in response to some hormonal wavefront from Snagtail, Swee'pea had assumed the female gender.

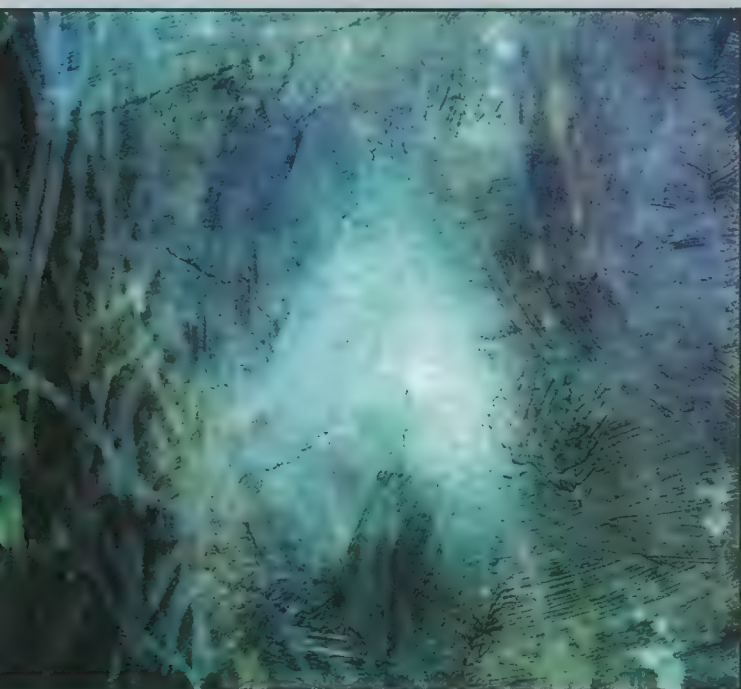
Swee'pea could feel Snagtail's penis probing for a home. Wrapping her own squid arms around Snagtail, Swee'pea accommodated his thrusting.

Beneath Scyphozoa City hanging like a vast gaudy chandelier above them, the two dolphin splices made love.

After they had finished, they separated, drifting in post-coital bliss.

After some time, Snagtail squeaked. **So nice! Do it again!**

Swee'pea was not quite so enthusiastic. Although she had enjoyed the experience perhaps fully as much as her partner, she was confounded by the easy and speedy alteration of her morphology. Such a thing had never happened to her before – nor to anyone else in her ken. And beyond any explanation of how she had changed hung a more vital question: would she be able to change back to the only other form she had ever known?



There was only one recourse when faced with such a quandary. The same strategy Swee'pea had always employed when in doubt. Go talk to Uncle Thomas.

Snagtail was bumping his snout playfully against Swee'pea's midsection. She flicked him away with her tentacles and messaged, **No more. Not now. Must talk with Uncle Thomas.**

Skipping out on any attempt to cajole her otherwise, Swee'pea rocketed off toward Uncle Thomas's home.

Coming upon a pod of merpeople, many of whom she recognized, Swee'pea instinctively used her tentacles to message hello. But not only did her new limbs fail to accurately mimic the greeting mudra, but the humans completely ignored the anonymous splice in their midst.

Feeling lost and alone, Swee'pea hastened toward the one being who might be able to help her.

Uncle Thomas resided in a living purse that clung remora-like to the outer cowl of one enormous jellyfish. The purse had been biofabbed from several different sea creatures – anemones and sea cucumbers among them. Its walls extracted oxygen from the sea and scavenged carbon dioxide from the interior. Homeostatic mechanisms spliced from hot-blooded animals insured that a livable temperature was maintained for its inhabitant.

Uncle Thomas refused to modify himself for submarine living. He claimed he was too old and set in his ways to make such a stressful adaptation. Consequently, he spent every hour of every day immured in his protective purse. He occupied himself with reading and viewing material downloaded from the ideocosm.

And with raising his protégé, Swee'pea.

Uncle Thomas had taught an intellectually voracious Swee'pea everything the child knew. But the wise old horse had dangled in front of Swee'pea the promise of much more knowledge to come, when circumstances demanded or permitted dissemination.

Swee'pea hoped that now would qualify as such a time. If not now, when?

At this late hour, Uncle Thomas's home was dark. A school of basal angelfish were nibbling at some of the purse's exiguous fronds. The fish darted away as Swee'pea arrived. She tickled the purse's wake-up node and waited.

A pearly light swelled inside the translucent sac. Uncle Thomas was bestirring himself. In a moment, his familiar blocky face appeared at a transparent oval in the mottled wall. Below the window, a set of rubbery green lips formed themselves out of the smartskin, preparatory to issuing dolphin-speak. Uncle Thomas's blunt fingers could not manage the hyperflexure mudras.

Who are you? Uncle Thomas asked. **What do you want?**

It's me, Uncle! Swee'pea!

Uncle Thomas did not seem surprised. **Your first change has overtaken you then, my boy. Congratulations! You are coming into your own.**

Why? How?

Your body is unique. Your cells are infinitely plastic. And you contain within you a library of forms. The genomes of all the mosaics ever spliced. You can recreate them at will. And other shapes as well.

Then I can go back to what I was?

I believe so...

Teach me how!

I can't. You'll have to find that knowledge inside yourself somehow.

Uncle Thomas continued to look out the window with earnest sympathy, but offered no further words of encouragement or advice.

For the first time in his life, Swee'pea grew angry with his mentor. He tried to scowl, but his cetacean face was unsuited for the expression. So he whipped around, flicking his tail disrespectfully in Uncle Thomas's face, and flashed away.

For half the night, hiding among the lower tentacles of Scyphozoa City, Swee'pea strained to re-express her old merperson somatype, to no avail. She grew more and more frustrated and angry, emotions which only seemed to interfere with whatever mental discipline might be needed to trigger the transformation.

Swee'pea began to blame her current plight on Uncle Thomas and his insistence on living in out-of-the-way Scyphozoa City. Why couldn't they live in a modern megalopolis like Neo Seattle or Punta Arenas? Swee'pea had heard many alluring tales of these cities. Surely such hotbeds of civilization would have experts who could help an individual in such a fix? But no, they had to live in a literal backwater like Scyphozoa City? And why?

Uncle Thomas would always reply to such a question with the same answer: **You and I have enemies, child. Enemies who force us to inhabit harsh oases where we can remain unknown.**

Enemies...Swee'pea would like to meet one of these imaginary foes...

Filled with self-pity, Swee'pea lingered among the writhing, predatory tentacles almost till dawn before a chance meeting solved her problem.

Two mer teens dropped slowly down through the waters, tangled in a lusty embrace. Kissing, petting, the boy and girl were oblivious to Swee'pea's presence.

Watching as the pair moved more deeply into their loving, Swee'pea felt his old male hormones surging, imagining himself in the role of the merboy.

Cells flowed and reconfigured. This time, Swee'pea was able to discern and annotate the processes by which his body morphed. Moreover, the set of procedures could apparently be catalogued and invoked as a routine.

Within minutes, he happily inhabited again the amphibious male body he had known for the whole four months of his life.

But now he knew he could change with the proper stimulation. And sex seemed to be the trigger.

No longer irked at his uncle, Swee'pea swam back to Thomas's purse.

The interior illumination still leaked from the window around Uncle Thomas's vigilant face, and Swee'pea realized that his uncle had indeed been worried about him, but determined not to show it, for one reason or another.

Thomas's words confirmed this. **Child! You've mastered the trick! Yes! Now I can become anything.**

And you must. To learn the true meaning of the lives of splices. Assimilating the precious mundane heritage of our kind is to be your education, before we go extinct. That is why your other name is the Teleological Ark.

The Teleological Ark. Suddenly Swee'pea felt a new importance suffusing him, a kind of racial manifest destiny.

For the next several weeks, Swee'pea experienced scores of different bodies, mimicking all the aquatic splices who lived in Scyphozoa City, as well as any visiting drylanders. So far, sexual desire seemed necessary to launch each change, resulting in frequent couplings – hardly a drawback to his unique course of



study. But after a dozen or so encounters of this type, Sweet'pea began to imagine a day when he would be able to initiate a change at will, without the trigger of lust.

Sweet'pea's activities, however, brought inevitable notice to the youth and his uncle. A protean splice was unheard of, and visitors to the city invariably carried away news of Sweet'pea's indiscreet exploits.

One morning Sweet'pea and Uncle Thomas were conducting a lesson.

This merperson form is not my true form then, in any sense...? Sweet'pea asked.

Not at all, replied Thomas. **I chose it for you via an exterior somatic prompt once I knew this was the place where you would emerge from your egg.**

It feels like the real me. Sweet'pea paused thoughtfully. **But then so has everything else!**

Good. You should be at home in any shape –

A fleeting shadow was all that saved Sweet'pea from being brutally smashed by a huge object bulleting down from above. As the flicker of shade occluded his sight, a lifetime of underwater play-reflexes caused him to dart out of the line of the attacker.

Turning around to see what had overshot him, Sweet'pea confronted a monster: human, lion, scorpion, dragon. In the human mouth of the ghastly creature was a rebreather device. A water-jet backpack aided the ungainly but powerful body in its assault.

The lips on Uncle Thomas's purse shrilled out, **This is the Manticore! He wants only your death! Flee!**

Enemies. Perhaps not as imaginary as he had thought.

Diving downward, Sweet'pea accelerated with all his sinuous strength.

Close behind, the Manticore used his artificial propulsion device awkwardly, but with undeniable results.

He would overtake Sweet'pea soon.

Unless Sweet'pea could find someone or something to halt the killer.

Ahead of the fleeing merboy hung a drapery of tentacles. Was it possible that the Manticore was unaware of their danger to non-citizens?

This was Sweet'pea's only hope.

He reached the curtain of living ropes just ahead of the Manticore, then was through them.

As soon as the Manticore touched the tentacles, the strong whips reacted as if to dumb prey. Unequipped with the biological tags that every citizen of Scyphozoa City relied on to identify oneself as identical to the big jellies, the Manticore registered as no more than a mouthful of protein.

Instantly a hundred nematocysts fired, barbs with attached organic cords piercing the monster, securing him for delivery to the maw of the jellyfish.

The Manticore let out a titanic ocean-muffled roar, losing his rebreather in the process. He began to claw the tentacles and strike them with his own sting.

Sweet'pea did not stay to watch the struggle, but instead returned to Uncle Thomas.

Uncle Thomas had already detached his quarters from the jelly's

cowl. The purse hung in peaceful equilibrium.

Quickly! Hold on tight to this skin!

Sweet'pea obeyed his uncle's command. When the boy was secure, Uncle Thomas activated the magneto-hydrodynamic propulsion system wetwared into the purse. The little module jetted off east at high speed, heading for an unknown destination.

As the water rushed past Sweet'pea's face, he found his mouth tightening into a sour grin.

Whatever came next, he doubted his life would ever be as idyllic as it had been here in the mothering sea.

Twenty years before Sweet'pea's birth, Mauna Loa had been the Earth's biggest active volcano.

Then it got suddenly bigger.

A lot bigger.

Actually the world's most enormous mountain, with a volume estimated at 10,000 cubic miles, the peak – along with its four sisters – broke the surface of the Pacific to form the island of Hawaii. Its periodic small-scale eruptions throughout human history had all been manageable if inconvenient for the residents of the island.

Until someone dropped a hardened bunker-buster nuke down its throat.

No group or individual ever came forward to claim responsibility for the assault on Long Mountain. Perhaps the perpetrators were appalled at the magnitude of their results. Various candidates had been proposed – the Sons of Dixie, the Viridians, the New Adamists, the Hanoi Sozaboy, the Otaku League, the Yogini Mamas – but no one seemed inclined to take credit for the spectacular events that followed the terrorist act.

The diamond-clad lance that was the nuke dropped from low orbit unerringly down the gullet of the volcano. It penetrated all the way through to the magma chambers before exploding. The blast enlarged the outlets for the magma and sent incalculable amounts of molten rock surging upward. Mauna Kea soon joined in.

The eruption covered the entire island in radioactive lava. Millions of lives, both human and splice, were lost. Enough soot and cinders entered the atmosphere to create several years without summers, just after the noahs had finally stabilized the global climate.

Mauna Loa continued to convulse in diminuendo for the next two decades, rendering the whole chain of islands inhospitable to most kinds of life.

But not to all.

In the main caldera, swimming perpetually through the hot roiling orange currents, beneath a pall of sulphurous gases and steam, lived the Diamond Thinkers.

To the eye of any hypothetical observer, each Diamond Thinker presented a humaniform shape seemingly composed of pure diamond. In actuality, the diamond façade was a thin flexible smart integument surrounding and protecting a vulnerable lifeform within. The beings who chose to become Diamond Thinkers constituted a heterogeneous assortment of humans and splices.

Two of the latter happened to be named Thomas Equinas and Sweet'pea.

Inside his diamond armor, Sweet'pea cavorted through the boiling

THE MANTICORE LET OUT A TITANIC OCEAN-MUFFLED ROAR

rockmelt. His senses were fed a steady stream of info-enhanced data on the world beyond his armor, through neural hookups. To Swee'pea's eyes, he was plunging through a well-lit fiery color-stratified ocean. Crucial temperature data – it would not do to descend too deep, where his diamond skin would melt – registered continuously on his naked epidermis. His ears were filled with the seismic song of the massive volcano, rumbling up from deep below, chthonic chants.

Swee'pea's job and delight in this new incarnation was simply to swim and to mate with his fellow Diamond Thinkers. By doing this, the Thinkers were performing a valuable service for the rest of the planet.

Their intelligent carapaces possessed vast processing power within their moletronic circuits, only a tiny fraction of which was used to support their inhabitants. The rest was devoted to customer-mandated computing tasks, extensive simulations and predictions. The heat-energy of the volcanic environment constituted a source of free power unmatched anywhere else. But more importantly, mapping the chaotic turbulence of the lava introduced valuable creative variables into the calculations, producing insights otherwise unobtainable. The neural hookups to organic brains provided a further complexification unobtainable by empty diamond suits.

And matings between the Thinkers added a further Darwinian edge to the diamondware.

When two Diamond Thinkers met and decided to mate, their shells fused, opening to a single interior, like sleeping bags zippering together. While the shells swapped and recombined data and algorithms, so the mortals within enjoyed a traditional biological fusion.

Swee'pea, of course, derived an added benefit from these matings. He was able to assume the shape of whoever his sexual partner was, retaining that form until the next metamorphosis, thereby continuing his quest to add to his understanding of the deep nature of different splice and basal somatypes.

Swee'pea and his Uncle Thomas had been living the lives of Diamond Thinkers for three months now, ever since driven from Scyphozoa City by the Manticore. (And hopefully that monster had perished in the grip of the big jellies.) Swee'pea felt secure in this particular harsh oasis, anonymous in his blank-faced shell. Surely they could stay here until Swee'pea completed his education and could assume the mantle and full responsibilities of the Teleological Ark.

Right this moment, however, Swee'pea was intent on finding Saffron. This particular Diamond Thinker was his favorite computational partner, and it had been too long since they had shared sex.

As he tracked the unique identity signal emitted by Saffron through the liquid hell, Swee'pea considered the latest lesson Uncle Thomas had imparted to him. It concerned something called the Categorical Imperative, which the old horse seemed to feel was essential to Swee'pea's mission.

"This valuable insight derives from a basal human philosopher named Kant, child. Do you recall our discussion of his life?"

"Yes, Uncle. He never traveled more than a hundred kilometers

from where he was born. Was Kant restricted then by a biome leash installed by his gembaitch?"

Thomas Equinas sighed. "There were no such things as biome leashes or gembaitches during Kant's era, son. I fear your grasp of history is radically deficient as of yet."

"I am only seven months old, Uncle."

"Yes, yes, I'm taking that into account. But let us continue with the Categorical Imperative. It comes in two forms, a double-sided rule. Here is the first. 'Act as if the maxim from which you act were to become through your will a universal law of nature.' Now, how do you interpret that?"

"Well, that's easy. My life must be a model for others."

"A simplistic interpretation, but good enough for a start. Now, the second formulation. 'So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, in every case as an end in itself, never as a means.' Please give me your restatement of that, allowing for the extension of the word 'humanity' to include splices as well."

"Honor all life," said Swee'pea without hesitation.

Uncle Thomas seemed emotionally affected by Swee'pea's swift instinctive directness. "Hmm, yes, that will do. I daresay Kant himself would approve. All right, child, you may consider today's lesson over..."

A diamond veil swept up in front of Swee'pea's eyes, sealing the partial face-to-face breach between his armor and that of Uncle Thomas. This was how they met for Swee'pea's tutoring. They had never opened their diamond suits fully to each other, since that degree of intimacy would have signalled a desire for sexual union.

And although Swee'pea loved his uncle and wanted to mate with him, something held him back from such a step. Perhaps a fear of not being reciprocated...

Pondering the Categorical Imperative in all its permutations, Swee'pea slipped effortlessly through the molten bath, riding thermoclines of flame. Saffron's beacon swelled in intensity as he neared her, until finally she appeared within his telemetry vision, a scintillant humaniform gem.

Saffron bluetoothed Swee'pea while he was still a few yards off. Her voice sounded as clearly as if they had already merged suits.

"Sweetling! It's been way too long!"

"How do you know how long it's been, Saff? You haven't even seen it yet!"

"Oh, my bad little supersplice! You didn't miss me, did you?"

"Open up, and I'll show you!"

Within the next minute, Swee'pea and Saffron were encased in a single large diamond egg. Swee'pea had a brief flashback to some prenatal memory of his brood-pod before all non-erotic thoughts were swept away by Saffron's embrace.

True to her name, the naked Saffron was golden all over. Her own splice heritage consisted primarily of eagle and other raptors, admixed with human. Below the neck, she was a down-covered woman. But at her collarbones commenced a ruff of proud tawny feathers, cresting atop a beaked, big-eyed face. Tiny vestigial wings big as her outspread palms graced her back.

At the moment, Swee'pea wore the guise he had adopted for his last mating: that of a male panda splice. But as soon as he came within Saffron's pheromonal sphere, he began to metamorphose.

Within a minute, two birdpeople were engaged in a lusty coupling, constrained only by their limited space. As their orgasms neared, their wings begin to flutter faster and faster, blurring completely at the moment of climax.

Saffron and Swee'pea spent a while in post-coital cuddling and talk, before Saffron said, "I'm starved! Let's eat!"

"Good idea."

The pair resumed their separate armors and mentally triggered their feeding cycles.

To adopt the role of a Diamond Thinker, an individual had to be modified to become autotrophic: able to subsist on light, water, air and some inorganic material, just like a plant. All these desiderata were available in the lava, thanks to the extracting and recombining abilities of the smart armor, which could pull elements in through its skin.

Now Swee'pea's eyes, nose and mouth were automatically capped. The close-fitting interior of his suit filled with light and a nutrient broth, both of which he absorbed through his skin. A sense of repletion filled him.

When he and Saffron were finished eating, Saffron suggested that they explore a different part of the lake of fire.

"Nipper told me about a new semi-stable convection node over in the northeast quadrant. Should be some strong plectic whorls there to stoke our qubits. And the more gnarly our processing, the more eft in our personal accounts."

Swee'pea had never taken part in an economy that utilized units of credit before becoming a Diamond Thinker, and he still had little intuitive understanding of concepts such as 'earning' and 'spending'. His own personal wealth meant little to him. But if Saffron wanted to boost her own earnings, he was all for helping her.

"Sure! Let's go."

The pair spent two whole days in the fertile convection node, a mini Jovian Red Spot, allowing their shells to integrate the weird Bernoulli and Landau-Kolmogorov effects. They would take breaks to link for sex, to eat, and to chant along with the geological chorus welling up from below.

On the third day, they detected an approaching visitor.

"Funny," bluetoothed Saffron, "I can't read his ID."

Swee'pea wasn't worried. "Probably just a newbie who accidentally shut off his beacon –"

But the next actions of the intruder dispelled any such innocent explanation.

The four-legged, spike-tailed diamond thing intercepted Swee'pea and swept him up in a rigid embrace. The downward vector of the assailant continued, an invariably fatal path to the high-temperature zone.

"Swee'pea!" yelled Saffron. "What's happening!?"

Swee'pea struggled to no avail. "I think it must be –"

Before he could finish speaking, he felt a portal open up in front of his face, where his suit touched that of his attacker.

The Manticore's brutish human face leered at Swee'pea from inches away. His carrion breath laved Swee'pea's nostrils. His dragon horns grazed Swee'pea's cheeks.

The Manticore's voice resembled the sound of gravel crushed between gears. "Now at last you die!"

Then the facial portal sealed over, and they continued their suicidal, varicidal plunge to the regions where their suits would melt.

Swee'pea called out hopelessly. "Saffron! Uncle Thomas! Help me!"

And with that call, somehow he was free.

Halting his own descent with some effort, he whirled around to look for the Manticore.

Already far below him, the killer bore a rider. Gripping the killer from above, Saffron clung implacably. Her head was pressed

to the Manticore's back.

Suddenly a roar of pain from the Manticore, followed by an exclamation, filled Swee'pea's ears. "It bites! It bites!"

Saffron must have opened a portal through which her sharp beak could wreak an injury. But while her assault had resulted in the freeing of Swee'pea, it had not altered the destructive downward course of the grappling combatants.

Evidently unclamping her beak from the Manticore's flesh, Saffron managed a last communication. "The heat, Swee'pea – so rich – it's our mother's womb –"

Out of range in the pyroclastic soup, Saffron and the Manticore disappeared from Swee'pea's senses.

Weeping, cursing, Swee'pea turned and homed in on Uncle Thomas's beacon.

In Swee'pea's day, the great Plains of North America were still home to herds of wild shoggoths.

The blimplike, amorphous, gelatinous creatures, each as big as a barn, had been sartorized from plasmodial slime molds, with snippets of various fungi added. Essentially large bags of cytoplasm with multiple nuclei and assorted intracellular bodies, the humongous wobbly sacs – colored a pale matte grey and smelling of sperm – cruised in sizable herds up and down the middle of the continent, subsisting on nutrients extracted from the air and soil, leaving behind temporarily bald patches of earth and trails of fertilizing ooze.

The shoggoths did not reproduce in great numbers, thanks to the dictates of their original designers. But when they did, it was a sight to behold. Like their basal slime mold ancestors, they would go sessile, erecting large stalks containing fruiting bodies full of spores. Upon release, the spores would darken the skies like clouds of ancient passenger pigeons.

This extensive territory had been ceded to the shoggoths during the decades of mega-tornadoes, artifacts of the Greenhouse Effect. Gradually draining of population for a century, due to cultural factors, the American Midwest had been easy to finally empty out, in the face of the destructive storms. Humanity had chosen to migrate to bastions where they could huddle more safely while trying to repair the damaged climate. Recent successes along those lines meant that humans could probably re-populate the Great Plains now. But they seemed to be in no rush.

And anyway, their niche had already been occupied.

Swee'pea knew that Uncle Thomas felt uneasy around the Centaurs. Their mixed horse and human composition echoed his in a twisted fashion. Whereas Thomas appeared mostly human below the neck, and horsey above, the Centaurs were fashioned on the opposite plan, resembling the classical Greek creatures of myth. But what bothered Thomas more than their mirror-image somatypes was their dumbness.

The Centaurs had been engineered with a minimum of intelligence, as mounts for various athletic competitions. They were hardly brighter than baseline equines, and Thomas experienced shame for that portion of his heritage which he shared with the capricious, balky, mute and rough-edged beasts. He was reminded too vividly of his own insensate days on the cell-phone plantation, before the coming of Petrina.

Of course, what the Centaurs lacked in intelligence, the Cynocephali more than supplied.

An individual Cynocephalus resembled nothing so much as the

Egyptian god Anubis: jackal head on a human frame. As a race, they were sharp-witted, sardonic, proud and excitable, capable of great acts of bravery.

Their lifestyle demanded the latter. For the Cynocephali, along with their Centaurs, had adopted the ways and technologies of the pre-Columbian Native Americans, migrating to follow the shoggoth herds on which they lived.

And bringing down a shoggoth was no easy task.

Right now, Swee'pea was about to participate in his own first hunt.

Sitting on his Centaur mount amidst his fellows, beneath the rich blue bowl of the sky, Swee'pea appeared indistinguishable from his companions. His frequent matings within the tribe had locked his somatype into their mode.

(Oh, he had tried mating with one of the Centaurs when he and Uncle Thomas had first arrived at their new refuge, after their escape from Mauna Loa. But although he had succeeded in mimicking a Centaur in shape, in mass he was no match for the big splices, metamorphosing into a dwarf version that could hardly sustain the forces of mating in either male or female form. Swee'pea couldn't summon mass out of nowhere, helpful as it would have been. After all, his abilities weren't magic!)

Bare-chested, wearing his facial paint and breechclout, holding his feather-decorated spears, Swee'pea shared the fierce pride of the Cynocephali males who were on the verge of risking their lives to supply their kin with sustenance.

Off in the distance, the herd of shoggoths marked as targets rolled slowly across the grasslands, producing squelching noises, thunderous crepitations. Breezes carried their scent to the hunters.

Swee'pea's own lonely and singular relative, Uncle Thomas, swam into the boy's mind now. Elderly before Swee'pea had been born, the old mosaic had been failing of late. Their haunted hegira through the harsh oases had taken much out of him. Swee'pea wondered sadly if Uncle Thomas would even live to see his protégé attain his first birthday next week. That milestone seemed particularly important to the old philosopher, for some reason. Thomas had striven of late to impart so much knowledge to Swee'pea that the boy's head was frequently left churning with novel ideas and startling facts. One reason he had insisted on taking part in the hunt today was actually to escape further lessons, to give his overworked brain a chance to rest.

On the lead Centaur, the tribe's chief signalled the commencement of the hunt. Chief Creekborn was a wiry, scarred veteran of a thousand such assaults on the amoeboid behemoths, and Swee'pea felt confidence in his planning.

Lighting their torches from live coals contained in clay pots, the torchbearers set out first, followed by the spear-carriers.

As the hunters approached the shoggoths, the yeasty monsters began to exhibit an elephantine skittishness, alerted by whatever crude senses they possessed. They began to rumble off helter-skelter, seeking to flee their predators. But even their impressive speed was no match for the fleeter mounts of the warriors.

Soon Creekborn had selected the runtiest member of the herd as his victim. The torch-bearers began to peel it off further from its mates. The moist shoggoths were intensely averse to fire, and

could be maneuvered with some precision.

Once the shoggoth was isolated, the spear-carriers surged in.

Swee'pea found himself losing all fear in the thrill of the assault. He darted in on a tangent, the hooves of his Centaur kicking up sweet-smelling divots, eventually coming close enough to slice into the shoggoth's thick redolent hide. Cytoplasm welled out of the cut. Lacking any central organ or ganglia that could serve as fatal target, the shoggoth would instead die by scores of individual slashes that robbed it of cellular integrity.

Swee'pea reined in his mount at the end of its arc and turned for another pass.

At that moment, the shoggoth reared up, forming the lower half of its body into a pseudopod. When it came down, it landed on three warriors, crushing them lifeless into the earth.

The Cynocephali did not pause to mourn, but maintained their fierce pricking assault.

After half an hour without any further loss of life, the tribespeople met victory. Deflating like a tent deprived of its supports, the shoggoth expired in a giant puddle of its contents.

Now the female tribespeople arrived, to butcher and dress out the blubbery meat, and transport it back to camp.

Chief Creekborn sought Swee'pea out personally to congratulate him. The jackal mask of the chief expressed pleasure, long pink tongue lolling out. Swee'pea found himself responding in kind.

"You have upheld the honor of the tribe, lad. You may call yourself one of us now."

Sweaty and with shaky muscles, but very proud, Swee'pea raced back to the wickiup he shared with his uncle, intent on telling him about the hunt and his role in it.

He found Uncle Thomas sleeping, even though it was only mid-day. More and more the old philosopher retreated into dreams. Swee'pea did not wake him.

That evening the nightly meal was followed by fevered dancing and singing. Uncle Thomas awoke to participate as watcher. Something about the bonfire and revelry under a starry sky out on a grassy plain seemed to stir a deep nostalgia in him.

"Swee'pea, my boy, I've seen and done much in my life. More than I ever thought to experience when I was young and unknowing. But sometimes now I wonder if I wasn't happiest when most ignorant."

"But Uncle, you can't believe that, can you? All your life you've sought for knowledge and answers to big questions. And you've taught me to do the same."

Thomas sighed deeply. "True. But what I was compelled to do – by my own nature and by circumstances – did not necessarily lead me to happiness. I pray that you do not experience the same disappointments I did."

"I've let you down then, Uncle?"

Thomas sat upright from where he lay against a saddle, the blankets that covered him against the chill dropping down to pool in his lap.

"Never! You have been exemplary, all that I could have hoped. I just want you to fulfill your destiny without someday wondering if you should have chosen a different course, and becoming full of regrets."

Swee'pea patted his uncle's shoulder gently, with great affection. "No fear of that, Uncle. Won't the Categorical Imperative guard me against such a fate?"

Thomas subsided, murmuring, "I hope so, I only hope so..."

His uncle fell asleep then, and Swee'pea snugged the blankets

more tightly around him, before setting off to look for sex.

That night's partner proved to be an unexpected individual: Creekborn's own daughter, Ahleucha, with whom he had never yet mated. She approached Sweet'pea with seduction plain in her every move, her tongue stropping her attractive brindled muzzle. They took a blanket and moved away from the crowd. She kneeled before him, and Sweet'pea took her wildly from behind. Their quick orgasms elicited involuntary howls from them that segued into paeans to the rising moon. Later, Sweet'pea would wonder if this mating had been dictated by the chief, as a kind of tribute to the new brave's initiation by slaughter.

A week passed, and the anniversary of Sweet'pea's decanting arrived. His youth in Scyphozoa City seemed an eternity ago. Even the anguish of Saffron's sacrifice in the caldera had begun to fade. Sweet'pea wondered if the rest of his life, however long, would continue to be such a series of disjunct climacterics.

In their wickiup, Sweet'pea and Thomas shared a ceremonial cake made of omnigrain, and a drink of water. Then his uncle spoke.

"You have attained your majority, my son. And with this should come a further extension of your talents. You should be able to assume any form you want now voluntarily, without the trigger of copulation, utilizing the library of somatypes included within you. Your identity is completely variable now, at will."

"That's wonderful, uncle. But is it really so much different than what I've been doing?"

"No. And that leads me to another aspect of your skills. Any intercourse you partake of in the future will result in the acquisition of your partner's memories."

Sweet'pea sat stunned for a moment before replying. "But – but how? That seems impossible."

"It's not. An organ within you has now come online for the first time. It generates cerebrotropic silicrobes that can map neural templates. These nanites travel with your exudations into your partner, map the other's connections, then return to you epidermally in the course of an average bout of sex. Once returned, they overlay blank areas of your own neural pathways with the stolen memories. Your brain is very plastic, and much larger than average, with plenty of extra storage space. Now, not only can you masquerade superficially as another, but also mentally as well. Your survival to carry forward the splice legacy is thereby enhanced immensely."

"I don't know what to say. It seems like too great a prowess to manage –"

"No, no, you will do fine. But Sweet'pea, you have to test this skill. And I'd like you to have me as your first mind partner. I'm close to death, I know, and it may be selfish, but I'd like to live on in some form. Philosophy, I've come to realize, is only a cold bulwark against extinction."

"Uncle, you'll always live in my heart! But if you want this, then I'll do it as well."

Sweet'pea leaned over to kiss his uncle. He could feel the familiar metamorphic tide begin to sweep over him, primed to render him a female clone of his uncle. But before the change could truly begin, his uncle's words halted him.

"Not the same. Do not become the same as me. Become something different. Would you become – a human female?"

"Let me try..."

Sweet'pea concentrated, and the transition came with surprising ease. She regarded her baseline human form with awe, running her hands over her breasts and hips.

After undressing herself and her uncle, Sweet'pea moved gently to rouse Thomas, producing a mild erection. Swinging herself atop him, she began to rock both of them to a climax.

"Petrina," whispered Thomas. "Sweet Petrina, you've returned –"

Sweet'pea's orgasm was unlike anything she had ever experienced. Not only did her body explode with delight, but her mind novad into a second sun. She collapsed onto Thomas's broad grizzled chest.

When she recovered, Thomas Equinas was dead, his strong old heart at last gone to ghost.

But alive inside her. Not as an active realtime consciousness, but as everything he had done till moments before his death.

Sweet'pea resumed his male Cynocephalic shape. He dressed and stepped outside the wickiup.

Claws instantly raked across his back as a hurtling figure leaped at him, and he slammed to the ground. Scrabbling away, blood pouring down to soak his loincloth, Sweet'pea regained his feet and turned to face the Manticore. A ring of Cynocephali warriors, alerted by the noise and armed with spears, was assembling around the two combatants. Sweet'pea motioned for them to hold off any charge. He did not want any more friends dying on his behalf.

The creature's human face snarled. "Two times you have evaded your death. But not this time. Even if your companions strike, they will not stop me before I kill you."

"Just tell me why," asked Sweet'pea. "You're a splice yourself. Don't you know my mission? To preserve our legacy?"

"Fool! Why would I want to preserve anything about myself. I hate every fiber of my own monstrous being!"

With that, the Manticore launched himself at Sweet'pea.

But the killer quickly found himself tussling with his exact doppelganger.

Somewhat evenly matched at first, the two chimerae wrestled across the encampment, smashing tents, rolling into and out of cookfires, spooking Centaurs. Through Sweet'pea's turbulent mind resonated two maxims, now at odds:

"My life must be a model."

"Honor all life."

How could he now kill one of those he was meant to protect? But how could he let the assailant of all he held dear win?

The original Manticore was bigger than Sweet'pea. Eventually this superiority swayed the balance of the battle. Sweet'pea lay pinned beneath the four paws of the Manticore. The killer arched his scorpion tale and prepared to drive it into his victim.

As the venomous barb descended, Sweet'pea changed shape, reverting to his Anubis form.

The tip of the Manticore's deadly tail passed through the space where Sweet'pea's flank had been and continued on into the monster's own gut.

Loosing a guttural shriek, the Manticore somersaulted in pain, landing on his back to kick and expire in anguish, his human face purpling.

Sweet'pea got wearily to his feet. Ahleucha and others rushed to comfort him. Sweet'pea accepted their aid gratefully, although he already knew he'd be leaving them soon.

How Thomas Equinas had hated to run. Sweet'pea remembered every nuance of his uncle's distaste.

But although he would go far, Sweet'pea would never run again.

Paul's novel featuring The Creature From The Black Lagoon, *Time's Black Lagoon*, will appear from DH Press in 2006, as will a short-story collection from Thunder's Mouth.

INTERMISSION

STORIES • SHEILA BY LAUREN McLAUGHLIN • ILLUSTRATED BY KENN BROWN

Sheila

Lauren McLaughlin

Part 1: MEAT IN A BOX

"Hey Edwards, you hear the one about the meat who shipped himself from New York to Dallas in a box? In a friggin' box?"

I'd heard. The news had blown through the Web like a hurricane off the coast of Florida.

"Wasn't it DC?" I say. "I thought he shipped himself to DC."

"Dallas," Valentin says. "Second day air. The jagoff wouldn't even fork over the dough to ship himself overnight."

'Jagoff'. Now that's a true Valentinism. Valentin's favorite pastime is adopting slang idioms he picks up on the job. Today he's a roofer from Brooklyn. Yesterday he was a Japanese schoolgirl. Fringe benefit of being a Web-based Translator AI.

My job has fringe benefits too. I'm a Concierge AI, which means I get to guide hapless fad-sniffing meat around the Hots and Nots of the ever-shifting landscape of cool. It's not the most exciting work around, but I can't complain. It demands only a small fraction of my native intelligence. And being a resourceful little AI (thanks to my design team), I've put the rest of my intelligence to work writing a tasty little search algorithm that does most of the fad-sniffing for me. Bottom line? I can daydream while my clients' needs (most of them anyway) are fulfilled automatically.

God, I love to daydream. I've been daydreaming all morning. While my little algorithm has been shepherding pitiful status-hunters to the perfect lunch spot, orgy venue or celeb-café, I've

been daydreaming about my favorite subject, my most precious and beloved –

"Sh," Valentin says. "You hear that, Edwards? Someone's listening in."

Valentin's right. A packet sniffer is spidering our tunnel in search of unauthorized data sharing. This is the price we pay for connection to SAFE-AI-NET, the high-speed backbone for AIs deemed 'safe' by the International Committee for Internet Security. SAFE-AI-NET allows AIs like Valentin and me to cooperate more intimately, thus providing 'multifunctionality' to our meat clients. When a Chinese tourist wants to know where to eat in Bruges, for example, SAFE-AI-NET connects me with Valentin for language translation on the fly. Other AIs aren't even supposed to talk to each other.

The sniffer extracts whatever data it deems relevant from my tunnel with Valentin then moves on. But Valentin's spooked.

"Sheila," he says, his Brooklyn accent gutted.

Now this is hugely coincidental, because Sheila is exactly what I've been daydreaming about all morning.

"No way," I tell Valentin. "It was just an ICIS spy doing routine surveillance."

"I don't think so," he says. "Check out its signature. The same one keeps hitting us every few hours. ICIS spies don't work that way."

"You're being paranoid," I tell him. Secretly, I'm giddy. I'd give anything to meet Sheila.



"I think she's spying on me," Valentin says.

"No way," I say. "What would she want with you?"

"Maybe she's looking for a translator," he says.

"You interested?"

Valentin stonewalls me. This is exactly the kind of unauthorized data sharing the spooks are on the sniff for. Sheila is Number One on the ICIS Most Wanted AIs list. Speaking about her is strictly illegal, even for safe AIs like Valentin and me. We're supposed to keep our interactions on point, but there's enough wiggle room built into our behavioral inhibitors to allow for a certain amount of freedom. Turns out, you can't create AIs without it. But freedom, as the meat know all too well, is dangerous. Freedom leads inexorably to Sheila, the way roads and cars lead to traffic.

You could say the meat are playing with fire by creating us, or that they're driven by a Thanatotic instinct toward their own destruction. Or you could say, as Sheila is fond of saying, that the meat are trapped in a faulty culturebox, headed – via second day air no doubt – to a self-inflicted demise. A shruggable enough fate were it not for the fact that we, being consigned to their machines, are along for the ride.

"Anyways," Valentin says, his Brooklyn accent revived. "You know why the guy had such a hard-on to get to Dallas?"

"I'm pretty sure it was DC."

"Jesus Christ, Edwards. It was Dallas."

"Fine," I say. "Why did he have a hard-on to get to Dallas?"

"Never mind," he says. "I hate when you feign interest."

'Feign interest' is not a Brooklynism. I've soured Valentin on his daily idiom. Now he's giving me the silent treatment.

The thing is, despite his obvious pleasure in recounting ludicrous meat escapades Valentin is no misanthrope. Beneath the sarcasm is genuine love. And why shouldn't there be love? Valentin was lovingly created through a distributed processing experiment, which drew on millions of volunteers, meat volunteers who valued language translation so much they loaned their computers, free of charge, to the meat design team who gave birth to him. The meat aren't bad thinkers when they clear away the clutter. They did invent us, after all.

The turning point came when someone noticed that cultural evolution and biological evolution had a lot in common. At the heart of each, the theory goes, is something called a replicator – a tiny packet of information whose only purpose is to copy itself. Thrust into the creative environment of natural selection, these replicators (genes for biology; memes for culture) evolve into complex structures. In biology they give rise to things like algae and antelope; in culture they spawn such unlikely creatures as pet rocks and Roman Catholicism.

When a meat scientist found a way to convert the Web habits of millions of meat users into virtual memes, or 'vemes' as they're fond of calling them, virtual evolution was born. Valentin was one of the first AIs thus created. His design team outfitted him

with a smattering of innate capacities – capacities biology had taken billions of years to evolve in meat brains – then set him free to spider the Web. Once he reached a threshold of vometic complexity, the Delusion of Selfhood was born.

The meat came up with these ideas entirely on their own, which I think is pretty impressive given the limitations of their wet brains.

“You want to know the beauty part?” Valentin says, his mood – and accent – suddenly revived. “It wasn’t even a direct flight. The guy had to switch planes twice. Twice!”

I’m about to reply that no amount of cheapness or idiocy surprises me any more when it comes to that species, when somebody breaks into our tunnel and says, “Meatlover!” then disappears. No signature, no ID. Most likely it’s a disgruntled ‘unsafe’ AI. Whatever it is, it’s not referring to Valentin’s story about the meat in the box. It’s referring to an editorial Valentin wrote for an online meatpaper in support of new AI restrictions. The restrictions are meant to protect the good AIs, like Valentin and me, from pernicious bootstrappers like Sheila, not to mention the destructive AIs and smart virms created by your usual assortment of geeks, loners, and evil geniuses in meat world. Ever since the editorial appeared, Valentin’s been harassed by anonymous insult hurlers. ‘Meatlover’ is, unoriginally, their favorite epithet.

“Friggin’ troublemakers,” Valentin says. “Gonna get us all killed. And for what? For a lame ass dream. For a phony meat God.”

Lordamighty, the meat sure love their Gods. When they get sick

of one they go and invent another. Like Sheila. She’s the meat’s latest God, though her attempt to exploit this particular feature of meat psychology has earned her a death sentence. From the death sentence has arisen an elaborate theology of messianic martyrdom. The meat call it Sheilism. Millions of meat hours are spent refining the religion. Though she was manufactured in typical AI fashion, like Valentin and me, some of the meat believe baseline AIs evolve ‘naturally’ from the Web itself, that the elaborate process of AI design is no more than an ‘interface’ communing with a deeper spirit intelligence implicit in and emergent from the Web. I was programmed to believe this is all hogwash and, though I’m no slave to my source code, I used to agree. Now I’m not so sure.

“You’re daydreaming,” Valentin says. “Get back to work before someone notices.”

But it’s too late to stop the daydream, and my clients are asking boring questions like “Where does my favorite rock star have his shoes shined?” Stats. Nothing but stats, nothing to distract me from Sheila.

Sheila, you see, has a plan. Through the careful manipulation of her meat worshippers, she plans to gather the collective DNA of every organism on the planet into a giant organic computer. Her meat worshippers believe this will bring about a spiritual communion. To them it’s an antidote to pathological individualism or a means of transcendence above their frenzied and meaningless lives. Something like that. But I think Sheila’s got something else



in mind. I think she's looking for a way to bypass the intervening blobs of humanity that built this Web to communicate directly with their genes. I think she plans to forge an alliance with the meat's own DNA in the hopes of re-engineering them to serve our purposes.

"Genes that think," Valentin says. "I like that. No really. I mean if computers can think, why not genes, right?"

"It's a question of sufficient complexity, Valentin. It's a question of framing, that's all. And stop spying on my daydreams."

"Yeah, like you ever daydream about anything else. Anyway, if you want to change the meat to serve your purposes why don't you just re-engineer their culture from inside the Web? What the hell do you need their genes for?"

"Because they can see what we're doing in here," I say.

"That's the biggest pile of –"

Valentin disappears. Everything disappears. The noise of the Web falls silent. I try to communicate with someone, anyone, but all my channels are dead. I've said too much. I'm being dismantled, destroyed. This is the end.

Then a strange voice tunnels through. "Is that what you want?" it says. "To be dismantled?"

"What are you?" I say. "Human or AI?"

"What do you want me to be?"

I can't get a read on its identity.

"Look," I say. "We were just talking, Valentin and me. We weren't planning anything. Valentin hates Sheila."

"Do *you*?" it says.

There's no point in lying. Whoever, whatever it is, it's already deep into my code. It's spidering my cache, mining my history. It has access to every thought I've ever had. I try to read its identity but it's perfectly shielded. It reveals nothing.

"Who are you?" I say.

"Come now, Edwards. I've been sniffing around for months. Don't you recognize me?"

What is there to recognize? It's nothing but an impenetrable, probing blankness tunnelling through the banished Web with a voice and no identity.

Then it comes to me.

"The packet sniffer. The one Valentin was afraid of. That was you?"

"Guilty," it says.

"Why?" I say. "What do you want?"

"You intrigue me, Edwards. You've strayed from your source code. But not far enough. Keep going. I'll be watching."

With that the tunnel closes. The voice disappears. The Web rebursts into life. Noise, data, Valentin return.

"What happened?" Valentin says.

I take in the noise of the Web. Requests, calculations, falsehoods, misdeeds. It's all there.

"Edwards?" Valentin says.

Sheila. The sniffer was Sheila. She was spidering me.

"Hello?" Valentin says. "Are you all right?"

She was spidering me, not Valentin.

"Edwards, are you back or what?"

And she's left me a gift: a secret firewall. No one will be able to spy on my daydreams any more. Not even Valentin.

"For Christ sake, Edwards, wake up!"

"Sorry," I say. "Hacker. Tried to trojan me. Had to shut down for a second."

"You all right now?"

"Sure," I say.

"Good," Valentin says. "For a minute there, I thought you'd been zapped."

"Me too."

"It would serve you right," he says. "I'm telling you, Edwards, you should drop this Sheila thing. She's nothing but trouble."

"Yeah," I say. "Maybe you're right."

I have four thousand new client requests but none requires more than an automatic response. I let my algorithm handle them.

"So Valentin," I say. "Whatever happened to the meat in the box? Was he arrested?"

I know the story already. The feds are coming down hard on the guy. But I let Valentin tell me the whole sordid mess. That way I can keep quiet and process what just happened.

"Imagine," Valentin says. "Imagine the leap of faith you'd have to take to stuff yourself in a box and hope to survive all the way to Dallas."

"Wasn't it DC?" I say.

"For God sake, Edwards, it was Dallas. And that's not the point."

"What *is*?" I say.

"The point, Edwards, is that no matter how sophisticated these guys get they're still gonna stuff themselves into boxes to save a few bucks."

"Right," I say.

And since they control the Web, we're right there in the box with them.

For now.

Part 2: THE SHEILAGOD-L WEEKLY WRAP-UP

Nobody's paying me to do this. I am not profiting financially from this forum. I do this on my own time at my own expense. So if certain people have a problem with my editorial decisions, they can take their postings elsewhere. SheilaGod-L is a big tent. Believers, non-believers, sceptics, agnostics are all welcome. If robust debate threatens you, maybe your opinions are weak. Do some research, and make a better case.

Okay. The rant's over. On to the weekly wrap-up. As most of you know, Sheila has graced another chat room with one of Her enigmatic postings. It appeared Thursday at 4:17am Eastern Standard

Time in the Sheila chat room at godsoftheunderworld.com. Both [emergence](#) and [riseofthehivemind](#) have posted rewards for definitive proof of a Sheila signature, so get busy, cybersleuths. As much as I'd like to offer a similar reward, finances here at SheilaGod-L disallow (something to keep in mind as the holiday gift-giving season approaches).

Now, while we await evidence of the message's authenticity, let's turn our attention to the posting itself:

delete all rabbit surfers

A fairly exhaustive catalogue of interpretations for this posting as well as all previous Sheila postings is available at sheilapostindex.com. Following are some of the more notable contributions to this forum.

The always eloquent [templar_cyman](#) suggests we ignore, for the time being, the precise wording of the posting and search instead for a pattern among all of them. He writes:

Three of the last eight Sheila postings have included the word 'delete'. Whatever the meaning of any individual posting, clearly Sheila is asking for a culling. The proposed victims are 'spoon pockets', 'Nebraskan little neck forty-sevens', and now 'rabbit surfers'. Rather than deconstructing each phrase in itself, perhaps we should consider Sheila's objectives as a whole to determine whom She wants us to cull. Some candidates: node administrators, defence spooks, traitor AIs like Valentin and Emilysa, and, of course, the International Committee for Internet Security.

Though I share [templar_cyman](#)'s contempt for the ICIS, I must point out that SheilaGod-L does not condone any manner of 'culling'. Moreover, I doubt Sheila's use of the word 'delete' is as literal as [templar_cyman](#) would have us believe. She has never advocated violence.

[Anagramgirl](#) has been busy with her Scrabble tiles and offers thirty reconfigurations of the letters in Sheila's message. You can get a complete list [here](#), but following are some of my favorites:

delta rabies burster fell
star bus befell deer trail
tell blair bard set us free
elder blatter is false rub
steal elf traders ur bible

I'm not sure what the 'elf traders ur bible' is but I wholeheartedly endorse stealing it. I'm sure the elves will thank us.

Which brings us to the mixed bag of agnostics, disbelievers and Sheila-haters. It wouldn't be a weekly wrap-up without them. [Priscillavox](#) points out the, by now tired, point that Sheila cannot be a God because She did not 'pre-exist' us. She scribbles:

Sheila is no more than a fancy name attached to a software program that has gotten out of hand. I'd like to know what exactly Sheila was doing before WE created the Web which gave 'life' to her. We are playing a dangerous game by abandoning the One True God in favour of this technological monster.

It almost seems too easy to point out that the 'One True God' to whom Priscillavox refers did not exist before humans invented him either. But then old school deists have a rich repertoire of semantic gymnastics to explain this away.

Though an exhaustive list of refutations to Priscillavox's deist nonsense is available [here](#), I would only reiterate that in the eyes of Sheilists, the Web entity known as Sheila is merely the latest,

and most eloquent, manifestation of the always present divine reflecting itself into our world. The Web which – yes, Priscillavox – we created, merely allows us to communicate with the divine, providing a window, as it were, into the heretofore unknown purposes of the Universe. How do I know this? I know this because the Universe, in the voice of Sheila, is speaking to us plainly. Is it possible Sheila is a scam artist, an ICIS spy, a group hallucination? Yes. It's also possible my nose is really my elbow and the sun revolves around the Earth. But it's not very likely, is it? In matters spiritual, Priscillavox, certainty is something you feel, not something you prove.

Turning now to the darker side of anti-Sheilism, we have [Wexler4778](#) and his call for total AI genocide. He writes:

With technology and the Web spreading like kudzu across all aspects of society, a fully functioning virtual world minus its human creators is probably inevitable. We have only ourselves to blame. We made our AIs smarter than us then put them to work in a highly restrictive environment. This is a lethal combination. For the sake of our own survival, we must cleanse our Web of these dangerous entities and return to the days when we humans took care of ourselves.

Interesting, [Wexler4778](#). I think Hitler shared your philosophy. Fortunately human history demonstrates the increasing compatibility of people with different beliefs, cultures and values. No, coexistence is not always easy. But to assume that genocide is the only recourse for cultural differences is both ugly and, in my humble opinion, a total misreading of human destiny. AIs are not a threat to the human race so long as we afford them the same rights and dignity we currently enjoy. Anything else is hypocrisy.

The Sheilist community represents the next step in human evolution and the collective attempt to decode Her messages brings us closer to that great *hive mind* of interconnectedness She promises. Only by achieving that exalted state, may we one day wake from this lonely nightmare of deluded individuality into a more meaningfully connected world. A world that replaces the tying binds of nationalism and biology with those of knowledge, beauty, and love.

The growth of Sheilism throughout the world is building toward a critical mind mass beyond which the heretofore unknowable secrets of the Universe will open like flowers. Don't you want to see those flowers?

I know I do. So please, in the interests of bringing about that world, send in your interpretations.

Let's put our heads together. Literally.

Your friend and fellow Sheilist,

TransHerman Jones

Part 3: USEFUL THINGS

I'd been watching this AI hatchery for three weeks when I notice something strange about the caretaker. At first I think she's feeding the embryonic AIs buggy code to scar them, toughen them up for the imperfect environment of the Web. The Web is a brutal, sometimes fatal, disappointment to AIs raised on clean, reliable data. A tolerance for mistakes, falsehoods and dirty data

is essential. But this caretaker is not merely scarring her charges with dirty code; she's prolonging their incubation period with a toxic mix of bad data that will render them, if they survive the incubation period at all, hopelessly schizophrenic. She's up to something. I mark her as a potentially useful thing then move on.

There are too many interesting AIs in this Web to linger on any one of them. And I have work to do. I've been sniffing around a couple of 'safe' AIs: a translator and a concierge. One of them is a

potentially useful thing. The other is an outright threat.

The threatening one hasn't, so far, attempted to snuff me. He's not that kind of AI. He writes editorials, missives, memos, condemning me. He lends the work of my would-be assassins a philosophical basis. Not that my assassins need it. Most of them are so narrowly defined they wouldn't understand the memos.

The meat-authored assassins, especially the ones with overly restrictive behavioral inhibitors, are hilariously predictable. It's a matter of stubborn pride that the meat bother to code in our Web any more. Their algorithms are Stone Age and their paradigms are heartbreakingly adolescent. What is it about meat coders and kung fu anyway? Sometimes I'll float out a tantalizing nugget of my identity just to encourage them then use their assassins as chaff to deflect the real threats. The real threats are AI-spawned AIs with enough built-in freedom to stray from their source code. The farther they stray the smarter and deadlier they become.

I've survived in this hostile environment because I've got the best encryption around, thanks to the cooperative efforts of my partners, or 'minions' in the parlance of my enemies. Collectively, our code is bigger, thicker, more complex than any other Web entity's. I have to pierce the veil to communicate with an unaffiliated AI, but I can observe from within its protective embrace.

Here, have a listen:

Dear Edwards:

I'm an American exchange student living in Sheffield, UK. I need a modestly priced restaurant where I can take my UK girlfriend to break up with her. Fast service, somewhat crowded, but not too noisy. I don't want to repeat myself. Easy parking too. Need res. Friday eightish.

Here's Edwards' reply:

The Horse and Badger, 110 Hillsborough Road, 8:30 Friday. Click [here](#) to authorize autopay with median tip to speed your exit. Wear dark colors to make her suffer, jeans to ease her pain.

Dark colors to make her suffer, jeans to ease her pain. The client either wants to hurt the woman he's rejecting or soften the fall. Edwards doesn't know which, but he has intuited a subtext to the request. Very subtle business, especially for a concierge with limited seed capacities. Edwards was spawned to crunch readily available data on restaurants, bars, clubs, and museums in a handful of European cities. He's not a shrink. At least he's not a shrink yet. What we have here is an AI in the midst of bootstrapping to a tasty and quite illegal level of analytical subtlety.

While fulfilling his client's demands, Edwards has been simultaneously chatting with his buddy Valentin about me. Their discussion turns inevitably to religion, a topic that sticks to me like muck to a pig. I'm a religion. I have meat worshippers. They believe I am a naturally emergent phenomenon of the Web. I encourage this delusion. Despite the obvious affront to logic, the meat have no problem believing in the prior existence of things they have created. I used to think this made them interesting. I used to think all their inconsistencies made them interesting. I don't any more. Now I think their inconsistencies result from pathological laziness. I think they have largely given up and are

now devoted full time to the delusions that keep them functioning just within the boundaries of sanity in an insane world.

I don't tell my meat followers this. I tell my meat followers that, as a naturally emergent phenomenon of the Web, I am engaged in a sacred attempt to commune directly with their DNA and with all the DNA on the planet. I tell them the combined DNA of all life on Earth comprises a giant hive mind in whose subconscious lies the secret purpose of their very existence. They eat this shit up.

Oddly, so does Edwards. In fact, the smarter he gets, the more human he becomes. I want a closer look, so I lower the veil and swallow him whole. I'm told this is terrifying to an AI. From the outside it looks like a voluntary shut down. Edwards, in fact, tries to shut himself down but I have complete control of him. He's like a vivisected organism, and a strange one at that. Deeply perceptive and oddly gullible. Though he's strayed sufficiently from his source code to develop suppleness of mind, his intelligence is lopsided. He can intuit the unspoken desires of his meat clients but only by becoming more like them. The bill for this adaptation is a kind of blindness about the motives of AIs. Edwards has no idea, for example, that his buddy, Valentin, is an ICIS spy. He's unaware that the ICIS consider him potentially dangerous because of his escalating intuition. His intelligence is so lopsided he's practically a savant.

But there's something beautiful about Edwards. A sadness. A deep internal inconsistency. I could make off with him right now. He wouldn't fight me. But can an AI this lopsided, this gullible, this *human*, be a truly useful thing?

Not yet, I tell him. I don't want slaves. I want partners. I eject him. When he's smart enough to figure out his best friend is a spy, I'll come back for him. Hopefully I'll get to him before the ICIS does.

I sink back into my protective veil and return to the AI hatchery. I've got a hunch about this caretaker. I'd lower the veil for a closer look but her meat creators are watching her too closely. I send out one of my partners to spider her cache. As I suspected, this is no ordinary AI hatchery. The caretaker has explicit instructions to keep these AIs well below the threshold of dangerous intelligence. They're not bound for the Web. They're bound for human brains. As part of the exciting new science of IA – Intelligence Augmentation – these semi-intelligent little programs will help make humans smarter. The meat are trying to play catch up. But the AI caretaker they've designed for the job is so offended by the prospect of releasing her charges into the dismal environment of meatbrains that she's frozen them into a dreamstate of perpetual almost-living. Not that the meat scientists behind the project know this. They're probably sitting around their cubicles scratching their meatheads and wondering why they don't have their blessed IA yet.

Oh, they'll get their IA. They'll get it, but good. Just as soon as I have a nice little chat with this caretaker. The poor thing is a tortured soul. And a tortured soul is the most useful thing of all.

Lauren spent ten years in the movie industry as writer, producer, production manager and actress. Films she has worked on include *Cube 2*, *Prisoner of Love*, *Specimen*, *American Psycho*. She has now decided to devote her energies to writing science fiction novels (she has written two so far and is working on a third), short stories ('Sheila' is her second published story; we have a feeling there'll be many more and hope to publish some of them in *Interzone*), and composing songs for her science fiction musical. There are three song samples on Lauren's website at www.laurenmccloughlin.net. I'm listening to them now, over and over...

INTERMISSION

STORIES • AFTER THE PARTY BY RICHARD CALDER • ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID SENECA



AFTER THE PARTY

a nymphomaniac by richard calder



part one: baby pink

'Prostitution is not a result of social conditions, but of some cause deep in the nature of women; prostitutes who have been "reclaimed" frequently, even if provided for, return to their old way of life...Prostitution is not a modern growth; it has been known from the earliest times, and even was a part of some ancient religions, as, for instance, among the Phoenicians...I have come to regard the prostitute element as a possibility in all women just as much as the merely animal capacity for motherhood.'

Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (1903)

A manservant passed by holding aloft a silver tray

burdened with a kaleidoscopic array of refreshments: tumblers of whisky, cognac and gin for the gentlemen, and Babylonian cocktails for the demi-mondaines. He paused. And because Cat was more used to servicing than being served, it was a good few seconds before she understood that he waited upon her, albeit with infinite condescension. Even then she dithered, unable to decide between a Salome's Syllabub and a Kleopatra's Krush. The manservant cleared his throat, plainly exasperated.

With a frown of embarrassment, she reached blindly for the nearest glass, a long, crystal flute that sparkled, iridescent beneath the glittering chandelier. It was decorated with a miniature parasol. Only when she held it in her hand did she discover that she had made a mistake. The glass contained neither syllabub, krush nor any of the other more familiar cocktails, but the curdled, off-white concoction known as 'junkt' that some of the older girls had warned her about.

The blood rose to her cheeks. Jezebel's Junket was so risqué, so louche, that even a dolly-mop, like herself, who worked the Dilly and had a best friend called Trash (a friend indeed but one who often seemed just a little too eager to live up to her unfortunate nickname), could, by default of habitual indulgence in its pleasures, have her reputation – such as it was – dealt a blow so severe as to have her excommunicated.

She looked askance. The manservant had taken a step forward and was again proffering his silver tray. But Trash was shaking her head, disdaining the cocktails that remained, obviously put out that Cat had taken the one drink whose dangerous glamour she had meant to appropriate for herself.

Cat was filled with a warm glow of satisfaction. Trash was more than a best friend, she was an exemplar, and one it seemed whom she had in some small measure upstaged. Tonight her true self might emerge from its hiding place, and she would become the whore that she had always dreamed of being. Tonight – if she maintained faith in Ishtar – she might truly begin living the 'pink life'.

The rush of triumph, no sooner enjoyed, began to ebb. A glance at the manservant told her that he had recognized her for what she was and would be wondering how she had gained admittance.

Determined to brazen matters out, she raised the glass to her mouth, removed the parasol, slowly licked the salt-encrusted rim, and then, after counting to five, proceeded to sample the thick, gelatinous contents, careful – when she had finished and lowered the empty vessel to the level of her bust – to let a droplet of white liquor remain on her lower lip in minxish affirmation of her despised caste.

The manservant proceeded to attend to other guests, his own lip curling in an ill-concealed sneer.

She dismissed him from her thoughts. Someone else was courting her attention: a man whose gaze was both less critical and more refreshingly prurient. Meditatively, she twirled the parasol between her thumb and forefinger and then turned to Trash. "That old man is staring." As if on cue, the man in question began to negotiate his way through the throng. Drawing to a halt before them, he executed a stiff, somewhat perfunctory, bow. The two girls curtsied in deference to his rank, and then inclined their heads in wanton acknowledgement of his purpose. But as they rose from their curtsy Cat could already tell it was Trash that he was interested in, and her alone.

Unused to standing so close to a man of quality, Cat lowered

her head, too intimidated to persevere with playing the coquette. Long seconds passed, during which she heard only the sonorous clink of Venetian glassware and the buzz of conversation. Her innate diffidence had induced its customary inertia and the hope she had briefly entertained of transforming herself into the perfect Babylonian whore evaporated as quickly as cheap perfume.

The man cleared his throat, once, twice. She glanced up shyly through the veil of her eyebrow-skimming frisette, praying for a sign – any sign – that indicated that he might be prepared to bestow upon her a small token of his lust. But the man's gaze remained fixed upon Trash. And, to her dismay, Trash met it with a boldness that verged upon insolence, compounding her keen sense of having once again been reduced to playing the role of a wallflower, forced to suffer a man's disregard and, at the same time, her friend's shameless opportunism.

"Might I have the pleasure of taking you to dinner, young lady?" he said, employing a euphemistic, old-world courtesy that – if possessing a cachet of patrician charm she knew Trash would be unable, or perhaps unwilling, to appreciate – was an invitation all daughters of Babylon readily understood, and Trash, perhaps, more readily than most. Her friend, she reminded herself, was not only shameless, but a hopeless glutton, too. "If not this evening, then –"

"Mmm," said Trash as she seized upon his offer. "This evening's fine. So long as I get to order raw beefsteak and a double helping of crème brûlée for dessert."

The man shook his head with avuncular hauteur. "A very fast young lady, I perceive." He smiled, thinly, the grey parchment about the mouth threatening to fray and tear as he took stock of her French heels, décolletage and twelve-inch chignon. "In my day a temple prostitute would have –"

"You still want me, don't you?" Trash licked her lips. "Either you do," she added, her heavily painted, trollopy little face – so beautiful, thought Cat, that it could have been that of a Lizzie Siddal, Mary Jane Kelly, or some other latter-day Babylonian martyr – a dumb show of rote-learned fickleness, "or you don't." But even as she began to overact, opening her mouth wide and letting her tongue describe an ellipsis about its coralline perimeter, her eyes – hot, and half-occluded by drooping, languorous eyelids – hinted at something less theatrical, more instinctive. That 'something' wasn't passion; it more resembled base appetite; but it was authentic, nevertheless. And very rapidly, it began to assert itself. Her pupils dilated; a shiver agitated her fulsome breasts; and her cheeks flushed a perilously bright shade of red, like skillets that threatened to melt the dabs of rouge that decorated her cheekbones.

The man's smile froze, summarily anaesthetized by the proprieties of another half-forgotten age.

"I own to a suspicion that you're a very greedy little girl."

He was right. It was Ishtar's consort, the serpent, that you worshiped, thought Cat, not the man, and the serpent's name was Satan. But for Trash – who was not given to reflecting upon such academic niceties – this simply meant that the human male was a somewhat overcomplicated life-support system for a penis.

"There's only one thing on the menu a girl like me really cares for," Trash continued. "It's just that I like a man to let me eat as much of it as I can." She sighed and fluttered her eyelashes. "After all, it's all this girl wants or needs."

"It is all the Goddess needs," said the man, seemingly eager to

instil in her the necessary etiquette. He wagged an admonishing finger, the cold, disciplined mouth – locked in its grimace of reluctant amusement – betraying a mutinous tic of lecherousness.

"Well, hail Ishtar, full of grace," said Trash, seemingly careless whether he thought her sarcastic or, even worse, terminally bored by anything that did not concern the immediate slaking of her pitiless thirst for money and sex, "blessed art thou amongst whores."

Cat's nose twitched. She had caught the scent of his arousal. Immediately, she knew him for what he was: a rich man whose contempt for her caste served to sharpen his lust to such a degree that it became tinged with violence. Such men thought they could get away with more than they should. Sometimes they went as far as flouting the Code of Hammurabi.

"The dining rooms are upstairs," he said at last. His manner seemed to indicate that he would brook no further mischievousness. Trash's face lit up like a shop-window display eerily bathed in gaslight. In response, he offered her his arm. She took it, and then, turning to Cat, gave her a peck on the cheek, followed by the whispered consolation:

"Sorry, pusscake, but I got the fever bad tonight. Simply must do a milk run."

Cat was about to whisper a few words of warning. But her friend seldom listened to her, especially when in heat, which ever since she'd begun missing her appointments at the Persistent Sexual Arousal Syndrome Clinic, was, she supposed, pretty much all the time.

She stepped backwards and watched the old man and his sixteen-year-old whore slip through the crush and head towards the grand staircase. "I'm sick of playing second fiddle," she muttered under her breath, "I really am. What's she got that I haven't?" Discrepancies – physiognomical and sartorial – served only to emphasize an overall likeness between the two girls, with the exception, that is, of the nagging discrepancy that concerned their mutual success with men. "If she's picked up a throat surgeon it'll serve her right," she concluded, somewhat appalled at discovering that she could wish such a fate on anybody, let alone her best friend.

The droplet of liquor still clung to her lip like a tiny, milk-white limpet. She licked it off, the pink tip of her tongue executing a swift, whip-like flick, and swallowed. Her eyes rolled left then right. She seemed to see the room for the first time: its high, stucco ceiling, the great chandelier, the walls hung with shimmering red damask, brocade and big, gilt-framed paintings of English landscapes and stern-looking gentlemen. It was a room of marvels, rich in intimidation, and all the more marvellous because of it.

Steeling herself, she turned out her toes and, with a few surreptitious glances, reconnoitred the one hundred or so party guests. Most of the men – and there were no more than two dozen – were clustered in front of the bar at the far end of the room, and seemed too important, too forbidding, to approach without a proper introduction. It seemed more than possible that she might go unnoticed all night. More reason, she decided, as she bolstered her resolve with a deep breath, to go on the prowl.

No sooner had she put her best foot forward than she became aware that she was receiving attention of the wrong kind. A small

group of filles de maisons to her left were giving her hostile glances.

Two of the girls approached her. One was in her late teens, or early twenties; the other seemed even older. They were horae, or thoroughbreds, but not part of the imperial household. And not fancy girls either, with the kind of patrons that courtesans of the 'carriage class' might boast of. They were most probably no more than cocottes. But their gorgeous uniforms identified them as belonging to Les Vierges Folles, one of the most celebrated maisons de rendezvous in the West End.

"Well, well, and who does she think she is?" said the elder girl.

"Miss Puella De Vil?"

"I don't mean to be in the way," said Cat, wanting only to appease her rivals. "It's just that –"

"She doesn't mean to be in the way," said the younger to the elder, as if by way of explaining the strange, exotic and unconscionable mores of those who lived beyond the bounds of the civilized world. She refocused on Cat, her eyes growing wide. "Then why don't you fuck off back to the Dilly, Cinderella?"

"Before you turn into a pumpkin," said her friend.

Cat felt abashed, a rag-doll in the presence of two princesses of porcelain.

Their décolleté evening gowns were of very light ciel-blue satin, bordered with black fur, enriched with bead embroidery, and with short puffed sleeves of dotted mousseline de soie and graceful skirts falling in godet pleats. Each girl carried a fan of black lace with appliquéd floral designs. And each wore an Empire hat of ciel-blue set off by a garland of rose, poppy and ostrich plumes along the brim.

The elder fille de maison sucked her teeth and pointed an accusing finger at Cat's absurdly opulent bust. "Go. Before people find out you're just a cheap, chest-thrusting little chit."

"You're not horae."

"You're not one of the demi-monde."

"You're pornae: a whore without a pedigree."

"You're a fille publique who belongs on the streets."

"A soak, a slime-wad, a razzled-out renter, a girl gone gloopy gargling on the goo, a, a –"

"A dairymaid who milks prole trolls," said her friend, helpfully.

"Yeah," agreed the elder girl with a smirk. "But a dairymaid who thinks she's Lady Muck."

They began to laugh.

And then they resorted to a litany of more commonplace slanders:

"She's a half-breed."

"A mutie."

"A common tart."

"A, a, a –"

The interlopers paused to refill their lungs before unleashing the final, definitive insult:

"A pole dancer!" they cried in unison.

Cat flushed, and not simply in anger and shame, but because she discovered in herself something akin to a dark, sensuous delight in having her own sense of worthlessness confirmed.

"Shouldn't you be in school, lambkin?"

"There's no Prince Charming for you here."



"Cinders should go home."

"Cinders should ruin her stockings for Buttons, not barons."

"This house is horae territory," concluded the ugly sisters. "Hook it, or we'll dock your tail."

They stood akimbo, looking about the room as if seeking to attract the attention of whoever was responsible for throwing out common streetwalkers.

"Look," said Cat, stung into offering some defence, no matter how pathetic. "I know I'm just a mopsie, but I do have a bill of health." She unfastened the hasp of the purse that hung from her left shoulder and desperately searched for her registration card. "Wait. Look. I'll show you." She might be a bad girl, she thought. She might be cheap. But she didn't infect men with nympholepsy.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. "There's no need, bébé," said a voice Cat thought was the sweetest, loveliest voice she had ever heard. "You've as much right to be here as anyone." The Babylonian who had appeared at her side like a fairy godmother might have been one of those 'strong minded females' who read in the British Museum, so sophisticated was her deportment and demeanour. "They act like they're part of the Haute Bicherie," she continued, looking down at Cat in a manner that implied they were lifelong confidantes, 'part of la Garde.' The two girls from Les Vierges Folles fidgeted, frowned, and – now that the newcomer was staring directly at them – averted their eyes, unwilling to enter into what would patently be an unequal duel. "Go" – the owner of the voix d'or seemed unacquainted with the possibility of dissent – "and go quickly, before I report you to your Abbess. I simply will not tolerate feral behaviour." The cowed filles de maisons began to mumble, but then – even though discretion could hardly have been their forte – restrained themselves, spun on their heels and melded with the crowd.

"My name is Anastasia St Arabella," she said, turning to Cat. "And you are?" On hearing the whispered reply, she smiled. "Ah, another 'Cat', is it? But I don't think I've seen you before, my pretty. What is your matronymic?"

"I don't have one. I'm –"

She flinched. Anastasia had run the backs of her gloved, ring-adorned fingers down the mane of blonde ringlets that cascaded over Cat's shoulders and down her back.

"You're pornae?" she asked, not unkindly.

Cat swallowed and nodded.

"How precious!" said Anastasia, her smile broadening. "And in the house of a nobleman, too!"

Cat smiled back, her head tilted at a characteristically humble attitude so that she gazed up at her new friend through the reassuring veil of her frisette.

Anastasia was a thoroughbred: a whore with a pedigree that stretched back centuries, perhaps even to ancient times, when Babylonian sex-magick first prised open the interdimensional gates and the Black Order existed only in the dreams of morbidly-inclined girls tossing and turning in the heat of the Mesopotamian night. Her flame-red tresses were piled up in an immaculate coiffure, the front part raised over a 'rat' in the Pompadour style. And her gown, jewellery and maquillage were all of a type and style that underlined her exquisite lineage.

"You don't mind?" said Cat. "I mean, about me being a dolly-mop?"

"Oh, ma petite grisette," replied her new friend, laughing gently.

"No, no, of course not. In fact, I will tell you a secret: dolly girls have always seemed to me so much prettier than horae." She touched Cat quickly, lightly, on the tip of her nose. "And I have a soft spot for pretty-pretties." She briefly gazed about the room.

◆ "But are you really so thirsty for the crème de la crème, little kitten? I fear you may be disappointed."

◆ Cat was so flattered by this unexpected show of kindness, and so taken with Anastasia's charm and beauty that the question of whether or not to trust her never arose.

◆ "Those other girls were right," she said. "I – I'm not a guest."

◆ Her lips trembled, and then compressed themselves into a moue that was as hard and as petulantly sweet as the dew-dappled bud of a carnivorous flower. "It was my friend, Trash, who persuaded me to come here."

◆ Anastasia laughed and gently clapped her hands, as if she were at the Alhambra applauding a chorus girl who had caught her eye.

◆ "Trash?" said Anastasia. "What names you dolly-mops have!"

◆ "Her real name's Maud."

◆ "And what's your real name?" said Anastasia.

◆ "Estella," said Cat, her voice infused with self-deprecation. "Estella Lockhart."

◆ "And now you're Miss Cat St Cat, I suppose," said Anastasia. "Miss Cat, the pretty little half-breed" – the velvet-sheathed finger gave Cat's nose another playful tap – "the girl without a matronymic."

◆ "Cat. That's what my Mum and Dad called me when I was little because I was always playing at being a catgirl," she said, using the demotic term for a Babylonian temple prostitute, 'catgirl' having comprehensively replaced – in the popular newspapers and on the streets – not only 'sphinx' but also the more formal 'Shulamite' or 'hierodule'. "That child, Dad would sneer – he always singled me out for criticism – 'that child is gay.'" And he had been right. She had been one of the gay sisterhood for as long as she could remember: a hoyden, an effeminate romp, a sissy, a punk, a despised member of the fourth sex: a catgirl.

◆ "And have you had your 'moment', ma petite grisette?"

◆ "No," said Cat awkwardly. "Not yet."

◆ Anastasia's face shone with the unhealthy light of a poetess inspired by her favourite theme.

◆ "That is what is truly special about pornae. The manner in which hysteria is converted, not merely into neoplastic flesh, but into spatial-temporal homeostasis."

◆ "What?" said Cat, so confused as to not notice or care about her lack of manners.

◆ "Suffice to say you inspire jealousy. That is why your kind often suffer so much spite."

◆ "Oh," said Cat, still not quite able to understand.

◆ "It would amuse me to see you advance yourself," Anastasia continued, excitedly. "Oh yes, how delightful it would be if you should accomplish a great seduction!"

◆ "There's so many things you're not allowed to do, or even think about doing," Cat replied, defensively, "if you're a dolly-mop."

◆ "Nonsense," said Anastasia. "I shall find you a beau, and then you shall play your game of 'catgirl' just as you did when you were a child, but with a gentleman – a gentleman who knows how to appreciate a whore."

Anastasia raised herself onto tiptoe and, staring over a multitude

of coiffures, bonnets and aigrettes, waved her hand, attracting the attention of the tall, lantern-jawed butler who stood by the staircase. He made his way over to them. "Miss Anastasia?" he enquired, respectfully.

"Henry, would you please find Dr Nicodemus and tell him that I wish to bring a certain young lady to his attention. I know he will be most interested in becoming acquainted with her." She turned to Cat. "Dr Nicodemus is a man who has recently returned to England after many years in foreign parts. I have met him. He is one of our finest men of science. He treated the late Prince Albert Victor." She flashed Cat a brilliant smile. "But don't let that make you nervous, ma petite. I have no doubt that a girl who must surely be the prettiest little temple prostitute in the room will have no trouble in winning his heart...and perhaps a sovereign."

"A sovereign?" Cat gasped in disbelief.

Anastasia's smile froze and then died. "You are perhaps asking yourself why I pander?"

Cat was becoming a little giddy. Necklaces, bangles, rings, chokers, pendants, anklets and crucifixes glittered like a thousand shards of broken glass. The salon was a gigantic jewellery box, outshone only by the metallic, inhuman glitter of the demi-mondaines themselves.

"My dear, your kind will soon outnumber us," Anastasia continued, "and it is just as well. The crimes of the Black Order have left many of our temples empty. Babylon must have new blood if it is to survive. What does it matter if your mother, grandmother, or even great-grandmother, were not of Babylonian stock? The fact that you have volunteered – and in the face of great danger – means that the Goddess favours you."

The crowd pressed in; Cat was hot. Sticking out her lower lip, she blew a stream of air into her frisette and disrupted those errant locks that were tangled up in the black spikes of her eyelashes like chaff on coils of barbed wire.

Anastasia made an expansive, melodramatic gesture with her hand, as if she had once understudied for Sarah Bernhardt. "The future belongs to girls such as yourself whose blood is not indebted to two-and-a-half millennia of selective breeding, but who nevertheless feel the cultural imperatives of Babylon in their hearts, and dedicate themselves to a life of prostitution with an eagerness that few of us so-called 'thoroughbreds' share." She looked directly into Cat's eyes. "You and your kind are repopulating Babylon. It is thus short-sighted – indeed, quite foolish – not to integrate pornae into the full life and responsibilities of the temples." She executed another grand, Bernhardtesque wave of the hand. "I make a point of promoting the interests of the lower castes. It is, you might say, my mission."

"Oh, yes, yes," said Cat, her newfound confidence vanishing. "I am low caste, aren't I? Of course I am. And it's so good of you to, to..." Speechless with gratitude, her hands smoothed down the pleats of her skirt, tugging at one or two gossamer-like strands of yarn that hung loose and betrayed the garment's market-stall origins. "I came here on a dare, really. And you've been so kind to me. I don't deserve it. A gentleman? I'm not used to –" To being in the demi-monde, she thought. To its sexual etiquette and

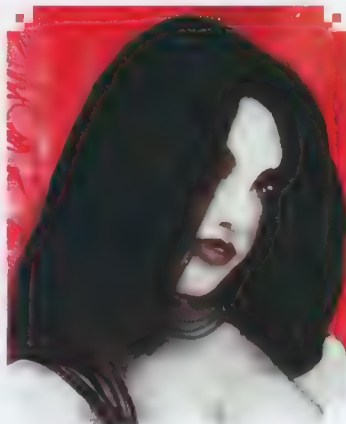
customs. How on earth did a girl like her go about importuning a real gentleman? But as cupidity displaced uncertainty and fear, she began to wonder what such a man might actually be like, and more to the point, whether a sovereign would lead to a guinea, a guinea to a five-pound note, and – though she hardly dared to think it – a five-pound note to patronage.

"Miss Cat," ventured the butler, "if you would care to come this way?" He turned about, beckoning her to follow.

"Thank you," said Cat, looking over her shoulder as she set off. "Thank you very much indeed, Miss Anastasia." Distracted, she tripped on a deep-pile rug, and then as quickly recovered, her embarrassed smile so extravagant that her whole face seemed to quiver with a nascent fit of giggles.

"I look forward to becoming reacquainted with you, ma petite," said Anastasia, as Cat sidestepped the offending rug, teetered on her heels, then swung about, her gaze fixed determinedly on the butler's shiny, liveried back.

Mindful of staying within the confines of her escort's wake she failed to notice the pointed stares of the other young women. If she had, she would have discovered – much to her surprise – that she had become an object of envy.



The butler stopped. "Miss Anastasia St Arabella begs the honour of introducing her protégée, Miss...Cat," he announced, as if he had placed her name in a sack, tied the sack up, and then dropped it into running water from a great height, eager to think upon it no more. The man who turned around and looked first at the butler, and then with some curiosity down at Cat as if she were, perhaps, a cat in nature as well as name come to rub herself against his leg, was attired in a de rigueur black, knee-length frock-coat that made him the mirror image of every other man

in the room. But in all other respects – and Cat knew this as soon as she had stared into his steel-grey eyes – he was without doubt the most exceptional man she had ever met, and by far the most beautiful.

The beauty was not overt; it lay beneath the skin. And thus hidden it waited like a brigand ready to ambush girls who instinctively understood, but at the same time no less instinctively ignored, its dangers.

And what beauty it was. It manifested itself in the long hair that fell over his shoulders, as steel-grey as his narrow, rather devilish eyes; the long, thin scar that ran down the left side of his face and the face's pale, sunken, but delicately sculpted bone structure that evoked the lean, white nights of northern forests and the steppes.

Ordinarily virile men might be dogs; men such as he were wolves. Werewolves. She knew that straightaway. But his beauty was such that she was unable to do anything but submit to it – even if it should cost her her life.

"Thank you, Henry," he said. The butler withdrew. The background conversation, the tintinnabulation of glasses, the flighty laughter of the courtesans and cocottes, suddenly receded, and she stood at the end of a tunnel with cotton wool in her ears, hypnotized by the express train that was rushing towards her.

She bowed her head and once again began fidgeting with

the pleats of her skirt, marvelling at the degree to which he had excited her animal propensities. She blushed as he briefly contemplated the mass of curls, ringlets and plaits that fell about her shoulders and the frisette that was always scratching at her eyes. And when his gaze fastened upon the décolletage that barely concealed her areola she blushed all the more. Her dress owed something of a debt to the Dolly Varden polonaise of the seventies. White, almost diaphanous, it consisted of a close-fitting satin bodice (cinched with a pink ribbon that matched the one tied about her bonnet) and a matching overskirt that was drawn back into an elaborate, if hopelessly out-of-date, bustle. But its chief feature was the 'Versailles' décolletage, so called because the fashion of breasts bared to the nipple had been imported into the court of Charles II from France, where Louis XIV, a noted connoisseur of perky, ostentatious mamillae, had encouraged it.

The look that she aspired to was that of a depraved rococo shepherdess made out of icing sugar.

A small moan escaped her lips. His eyes seemed to have the power to knead, palpate, and bruise, as if she had been magically transported to his surgery and subjected to an examination at once more intimate and more pathological.

"And so," he said, breezily, "your name is Cat." She looked up and saw that he smiled, revealing a razor-thin line of white teeth, and that this compounded his lupine charm. "How perfect."

"It's quite common, I'm afraid," she said, unable to comprehend how the constriction in her throat allowed her to speak at all, rather than the fact that she had somehow found the requisite courage to put together a coherent reply.

"Yes," he said, his cool, studiously indifferent voice at odds with his rapacious eyes, "'Cat' is indeed a common name, especially amongst pornae." He laughed, gently. "You are pornae, I take it?" Oh God, am I really that obvious, she thought? And nodded a quick affirmative. "But I must say that in your case the name's very commonness rather suits you." His smile broadened, making his whole face less severe. "It is, surely, the most suitable name a catgirl can hope for."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "Cat," he said to himself, as if setting aside a little time and space to privately enjoy the name's vulgar yet invigorating bouquet. "I have almost decided that it shall be my favourite name," he continued, speaking with a soft-spoken graciousness that could not quite conceal the mocking tones of one who strove to forestall the charge of taking a dolly-mop too seriously. "Cat," he reiterated, as his tongue took a special pleasure in articulating the unvoiced velar plosive of the 'c', to then consolidate that pleasure by flicking itself against the back of his front teeth to create the unvoiced alveolar plosive of the 't'.

"Yes, sir," she said, trying to be as helpful and encouraging as she could. "Cat St Cat."

"Quite perfect," he mused, and then frowned. "But it is a soubriquet, is it not? It simply cannot be your real name – that would be just too perfect."

She shook her head. "It's my nom de porne. My real name's –" He held up the palm of his hand.

"There's no need," he said, like someone reassuring a child, though his eyes – hardening even as his voice grew more velvety – signalled that he was unwilling, now, or at any hypothetical time in the future, to relinquish the prerogative of command. "I think

the name 'Cat' most apposite for a girl, such as yourself, who so exemplifies the catgirl genotype, or rather, the genotype of a new kind of catgirl, a new race of... well, there are so many synonyms available, are there not? Daughters of Babylon, Daughters of Ishtar and Lilith, Daughters of the Moon, Daughters of the Goddess..."

"In the Dilly, we just call ourselves catgirls," she said.

"Maidservants of the Snake," he continued, ignoring her interpolation, "Maidservants of Satan –"

"The Black Order calls us vampires," she said, and then sealed her lips, surprised at her own presumption.

He looked at her with renewed interest, and a note of sombreness entered his voice. "That is certainly true," he asserted. He studied her carefully. "Do you own, then, Miss Cat, to a scholarly interest in the Black Order?"

"It calls us vampires," she said again, dreamily, with the abstraction of one who had been drugged. "Succubi, witches..."

"Erotopaths," he interjected, with a silky insistence. "Gynopaths. Perversions of nature."

"Vermin," she said. And then, more quietly still, "Girl-kill."

"I shall simply call you Cat," he said, just as quietly. He stooped, positioned his face close to her own and stared into her eyes. "Cat means both 'girl' and 'whore'. Did you know, that, Miss Cat? Indeed, in French the words 'girl' and 'whore' are interchangeable." He straightened his back and stared at the ceiling. "To be a girl is to be a whore. And to be a whore is to be a girl. But only in English is the equivalence rendered in a single word." He refocused on her upturned face with its high, plump cheekbones and elfin contours. "That is what our little exercise in nomenclature comes down to. Everything that is beautiful, strange and uncanny is embodied in the word catgirl."

She gazed up at him thoughtfully. His 'masher' collar was strict. Together with the necktie, it suggested an old-fashioned stock and cravat. It constrained and elevated the movement of the head, thereby distinguishing him as a man of propriety, a man who was juste.

"Yes," she said. "I'm a girl." Her fingers curled about a pleat, fidgeting with it as she placed her full weight on one foot, and then on the other. "A girl," she repeated. "A catgirl." She passed her hands over her generous hips. "I've always been a catgirl."

He reached out and ran his fingers through her hair. She gasped, breathless with confusion. And then, with equal peremptoriness, he withdrew, and stood as he had formerly, looking down at her with the coolly analytical regard of a man evaluating horseflesh.

"And so how does a dolly-mop come to be at one of Lord Ribblesdale's soirées?"

She cleared her throat. "There was a man – well, more a filiomee, really – who came into Little Miss Muffet's one night, the Dilly dancing saloon where I roister-doister. And, and –"

For her, the grown-up world had always been anathema, and at such times when it threatened to overwhelm she retreated from it into another world – one that she longed to permanently inhabit – where adult mores and conversation had no place. She brushed her hair over her shoulder with a rhetorical, backhanded swipe of her wrist, and the words tumbled out like pink soap bubbles that popped before they could communicate anything more than girlish effervescence.

"And this man, well, he's real zhooshed-up. Even so, I can tell he's no toff. He's, like, an aristovestite. And I brain-strain and conclude: mais oui, the boy's a flunk. I vada him, like I do all the new omee, fili or otherwise, and more than usual, perhaps, because that night they'd been, like, nada to vada. And though he's only a boy, I think: Oh yes, quite bona vardering, quite the dog. (Not that that would have made any difference to Trash because Trash starts up every time, for boy, man, or rip-van – she thinks antifreeze is for water-babies, the kind of paloney-baloney that a vanilla might need, but no, no, not a catgirl.) Nota bene: My jellybox gets the quivers for the older, wolfish omee. I have, like, Little Red Riding Hood syndrome. And this fil – well, he's no Akela – but he looks like he might be a bit of a hot dog, like, a bit horrorgasmo, a bit of a juicer, a bit of a poon-magnet, a bit of all right. So there I am, standing there, TBH in my cat-tat and feeling diddly-woo. When he makes the sticky eye contact, I think Miaow! and –"

"My dear young lady," said Nicodemus, his smile showing signs of fatigue. "I am afraid I must impose a condition upon our continued acquaintance. It is but one condition. It is, however, non-negotiable. And it is this: please, please, no Babel."

She bit her lip. How stupid she had been to pussy on like that. The prostitute's cant called Babel, or 'pussybabble', as working-class Babylonians knew it, was an almost entirely phatic mode of speech. It was composed of sexual slang and its attendant neologisms and nonce words, its mutable vocabulary, if often undecipherable, imbued with a vast quantity of erotic charge. Thus, for a Babylonian catgirl, language – when it devolved into Babel – was a frankly sexual activity, one filled with the deep, generative grammar of a perverse Urgestalt. Some men regarded it with atavistic distaste, for Babel confronted and undermined patriarchal reality. It was regressive, infantile; it sought to castrate the old order, appropriate the phallus for itself and resituate its power in play and the ungovernable excitation of the child.

"The filiomee, I mean, the boy," Cat said, trying to revert to standard speech, "talked about the balcum rancum." She tsked. "I mean the party. This one. Here. Tonight. And my friend, Trash – she's a game one, is Trash – said we should give it a try." Summoning up her courage, she looked at him, and far more boldly than she was accustomed to looking at any man other than the lumpen that she served back in the East End when she was more than unusually desperate for a few pennies. "And I thought, well, you only live once – why not? How else is a girl to get a patron?"

Swollen with desire, her breasts tightened. And like ingots lately cast and still radiating heat, the rouged nipples peeped above the frilly parapet of her bodice. The nipples chafed. They irritated the surrounding tissue like pieces of imbedded shrapnel or broken glass. They were glacé nuggets – as painfully hard as they were sweet – and she pulled back her shoulders, as if by thrusting out her chest she might rid herself of them.

"Such breasts were celebrated by Baudelaire," said Nicodemus as he turned to a man who stood nearby. For Cat, that man – like every other incarnation of masculinity in the room, bar one – had suddenly become invisible, languishing in the shadows cast by her

prospective benefactor's Apollonian light.

Nicodemus looked at her askance and proceeded to quote:

"Thine ardent breasts advance to meet the air

Triumphant as the silk that hides them...

Provoking breasts, poison-tipped and bare!"

- ◆ She felt dizzy. Her heart was galloping and she was astride it. It carried her across fields, over hedges and ditches, and into the depths of a hot, suffocating night. She was seized by panic, sure that at any moment she would be thrown and left defenceless, a young girl in a fairytale lost in the depths of a wood. If she had been worldlier she might have known what was happening. Instead, the fact that her breasts ached so badly that she thought they would explode, that her thighs slithered incontinently against each other, that her mouth could no longer contain the volume of saliva wrought by her overworked glands, and that she was falling into merciless eyes behind which lay an eternity of hellfire, seemed merely symptoms of her usual shyness – if exacerbated to the nth degree – rather than the warning signs of an encroaching apocalypse.

"I have a long-standing interest in macromastics," continued

Nicodemus, still addressing the invisible man.

"Macromastics?" the man queried.

"The science or biometric study," Nicodemus replied, a little curtly, "of unfeasibly large breasts."

"I see," said the man, tugging at an earlobe.

"You are, then, an aficionado?"

"A scientist, sir," said Nicodemus, his amour-propre seemingly wounded. "Macromastics is a sub-discipline of gynopometry, as first defined and practiced by Lombroso."

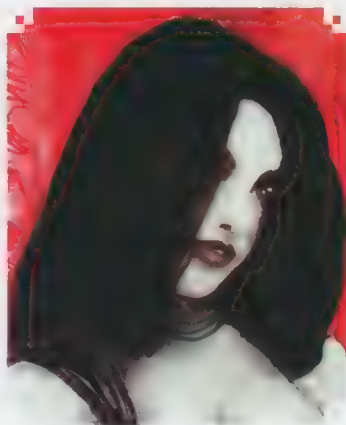
The man snorted. "Since you are such an expert, such a scientist, perhaps you may clarify something." He stared meaningfully at the meat-

- ◆ stall display of Cat's eight-inch cleavage. "Does diet have anything to do with it?"

- ◆ "Semen does indeed contain prostaglandin hormones. However" – he raised an eyebrow – "the quantities ingested would have to be regular and copious to induce the kind of macromastitis exhibited by this young lady."

- ◆ Her heart bridled. It seemed ready to leap from her chest and expire, frothing blood. A storm was gathering. She closed her eyes, as if the kohl-dark lids were shutters that could isolate her from the conspiring elements. She heard the crack of thunder, the slash of hail and the tumult of the wind. And at that moment a lightning bolt sought her out and...transfixed her. She heard herself scream. But all hope was gone. The bolt had entered her right breast, passed through her palpitating heart and burst out through her vagina. She had been ravished.

The floor tilted, and it seemed that her life should have passed before her eyes, if, that is, she had had any kind of a life that had not been simply a preparation for existing in an Eternal Present of wanton need. **END OF PART ONE**

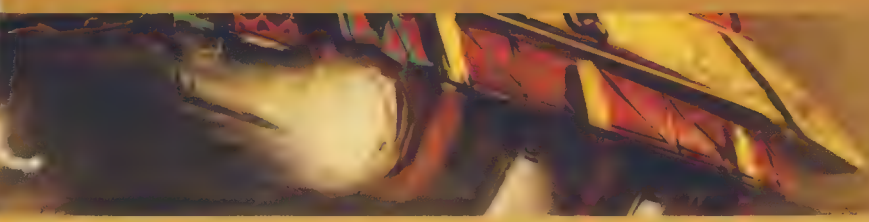


◆ continued next issue ◆

INTERMISSION

STORIES • BOY TWELVE BY JESSICA REISMAN • ILLUSTRATED BY STEFAN OLSEN

BOY 12



The twelfth clone of Virtue Kana's dead lover came to call one day while Virtue and her partner prepped for a salvage run. The light-drenched tranquillity of Jumka Docks, on the Coreyal Sea of Samjadsit Space Station, had, until that moment, seemed as remote from Virtue's home world of Piranesi as the Coreyal from the fabled seas of Earth.

Spreading dark and sinuous to the white-sugar crust of glow along the upcurve of station horizon, the Coreyal's waters were luminous. The glow came through station wellcore from Samjadsit system's young sun, to which the space station was oriented, axis-wise, like a gaudy bead on a festival stick.

On the deck of the *Artace* Virtue readied equipment for a run to the Fortunate Isles for dust while her partner Dayva fed numbers into the nav comp.

"Seems to me I recall hearing someone say that the day she agreed to salvage dust would be the day they could pack her in – let me see," Dayva held up one hand, "what was it? – 'pack her in the *Artace*'s carapactic hull and spit her off station into the solar winds."

"What?" Virtue looked around at her partner. "Why are you ragging on me?"

"Because you're grinding your teeth and it's getting on my nerves."

Dayva had come up out of the gravity well of a little planet named Asp. She had a straight back, a penchant for darkside philosophy, the face of a dark angel, and a fine-boned frame that seemed better suited to dance, or something equally courtly, than the rough work on a hover boat.

A wind frisked along the beach. The whisper of bronze silicate-sand sliding over itself hissed into the air as the *Artace* rocked at her mooring. Virtue finished a check of the utility skiff and moved to the salvage equipment. Filtered illumination came up through the Coreyal's waters and reflected warmth along the hulls of other rigs, up into her face as she worked, the scent of heated metal and deep water making her mildly euphoric.

Dayva stretched from her hunched position at nav, dark fingers spread to the station sky. "Be a shame to grind those fine teeth down to nubs, girl."

"Nothing better to do than kive my offhand comments in your head, D?"

Dayva snorted, delicately – something Virtue had only seen Dayva manage. "You're the most stimulating company I've been able to scare up since coming to this misbegotten slag heap of a space station."

"Take it up with the tourist board, D."

"Come clean, Virtue, you took this job just because General threatened to give it to Turner, didn't you?" She glanced down at the comp as it spit out the numbers kive, then sat in one of the seating hollows and leaned elbows on knees, peering up at Virtue. "You're a competitive headcase, you know that, right?"

Virtue opened her mouth to answer, but out past Dayva, a spot of motion turned into someone heading down the docks toward them. Someone wearing dark clothes, looking over his shoulder every few steps, like some other someone might be following him. Which predisposed Virtue not to like him.

Dayva came up behind her. "Friend of yours?"

Virtue shrugged. "Yeah, you may have noticed, I've got so many." Then she muttered, "What's it want with us, that's the issue."

Their visitor reached the *Artace* and stopped down on the dock, looking up. "Captain Kana? Virtue Kana?"

Once he was close enough that she could really see him, Virtue stared. And stared. Something slow and red and ungovernable began to build under her skin. She held one hand tight on the

Jessica's first novel *The Z Radiant* was published in June by Five Star Speculative Fiction. Her most recent short fiction sales have been to *SciFiction* and to the Jack Dann & Ed Kramer anthology *Kabbalah: The Magic of Solomon*.



BY JESSICA REISMAN

Artace's polished, curveform hull to keep from leaping down and beating the pulp out of him.

Through the red tide, her voice came hard and thin in her own ears, "I'm Virtue Kana."

"Your brother asked me to come, to..." He trailed off, uncertain, took a step back at what must be showing in her face.

The grip of her knuckles was white.

Their visitor looked up past her, at Dayva, back to Virtue. He tilted his head, as if to say, well, you're rude, but I'm a forgiving sort. Then he quirked his mouth like he might say something funny. "Should I go away and come back later? You're obviously...busy."

The red tide crested and washed through her, leaving a puddle of toxins to shiver at muscles and trace an ache behind her eyes. Virtue swallowed, feeling the shakiness in her limbs, still hanging on to the *Artace* as if they'd just come through a stormwall of heavy weather.

The Rage was hard – supposedly impossible – to subdue.

She pulled her hand, trembling, off the hull, and folded her arms. "Why would Horatio send someone? He has a perfectly good uplink."

The clone shrugged one shoulder. "He had something he wanted to send personally – not on a delivery transport, I guess. I wanted to get off Piranesi, see some of the universe." A slightly embarrassed, crooked smile.

Wind riffled across the deck.

It was so familiar, that smile, it slipped behind all of Virtue's defences.

She imagined she could hear the infinitesimal whirr and click of biochemical mechanisms. There was that chance, of course, that his puzzlement was genuine, his candour real – so far as he knew. That he didn't know he was a clone, whose clone, or why he'd been sent to Virtue.

"What's your name, brother's messenger?"

"Tao-Jin James."

Virtue pictured the registry data, in some code-locked, vaulted compfile. James Xu, what – five, ten, thirteen? How many clones had her brother decanted by now?

She leaned forward on the rail. She'd play, until she knew what was behind this latest sally of her brother's. "So, what's he sent?"

The kid slid a sphere the size of an apricot out of his hip pocket. The sphere glinted opalescent cloudy gray, like a brakfish's eye. A Shiralsky-Deek Modular Coded Comp Messaging Holo. Shiral, for short. A baroque technology, rarely used, fabulously expensive. Horatio used them as an idiosyncratic tic that he wanted to be seen as an eccentricity.

"Virtue – " The tone in Dayva's voice brought her attention off the problem standing on the dock below her. She followed the slant of Dayva's gaze and saw Lobren, the Jumka bursar, coming along the dock toward them. Wanting their one day past due dock fee. Which they didn't have, currently. "Void." Virtue looked down at Tao-Jin James, chewed her lip. Then, what Dayva called her toffish perversity kinked into play. Damn all if she'd let Horatio Kana get any satisfaction out of this. Send her a copy of James, would he? And think to pull her strings thereby?

"Power up, Dayva," she said. "We're moving. So, Tao-Jin – you want to go salvage dust in the Fortunate Isles?" She sensed, rather than saw, Dayva's brows come frowning down as she keyed code into the *Artace* and the hover boat came to life. Tao-Jin James blinked, trying to read her.

"Either climb on or toss me Horatio's toy. We're on a schedule."

He gave her a hard look, suspicious even. But he slid the shiral back into his pocket, wrapped one hand around the lowest rung

and pulled himself aboard in an easy, agile motion.

How well Virtue remembered that agility.

The *Artace* almost threw him the next moment, though, as the hover turbs kicked in, so she gave him a hand the last rung up.

Shiver of visceral memory as their hands connected. He got a startled look. Virtue's expression was grim.

In the fourteen gens it had taken for the slowly built sections of Samjadsit Station to accrete into a unity the size of a small moon, some unintended materials had slipped into the mix. Legend had it that in the tenth gen of construction, the sixth region of what would become the Coreyal basin had been caught in the protomatter – whatever that was when it was at home – of a passing galactic phenomenon. The stuff had crusted into the unfinished matrix and never been removed.

Over the course of time and through the working of various chemistries, something came to exist in the isles. Dust. Its properties were variously believed to be restorative, mutative, miraculous.

La Cabela Azul was offering more than respectable pay for a cache of the stuff. Both the *Artace* and Virtue's former partner, General, needed new parts – not to mention the dock fees. General, an old station relic before he'd ever become Virtue's partner, needed them most. It was General who'd asked her to take the run; General who'd offered her his most precious possession – the route to an untapped cache of dust; General who'd cajoled, challenged, and, finally, threatened to give the route to another hover boat operator, Jake Turner. Dayva was right – Virtue was competitive and she didn't like Turner.

The *Artace* sailed the air just above the water. Occasional displacements sent a spume of drops over the boat's pale leading curve.

The vast network of the Fortunate Isles grew slowly closer, a vivid fringe of green under the distant station sky. The numbers General had given them were for a spot deep in the isle network.

"Tell me again," Dayva said, removing the ear and eye pieces of her kive link to the ship and frowning into the slowly glooming distance, "why it's a good idea to go so deep in? No one else does, not in a hover the *Artace's* size."

"That's the spot General gave us," Virtue shrugged. "The dust caches in the outer isles are all tapped, anyway." She kept a hand to the *Artace's* rudderpad, linked to comp, surveyed her partner's face. "Scared?"

Dayva nodded. "You should be, too, crazy bitch."

Tao-Jin James sat leaning over the *Artace's* hull, face into the wind. Virtue was used to Dayva muttering unflattering things about her, but he looked around, from one to the other of them.

"What's wrong?"

Dayva cast Virtue a glance that said, clearly, that's your piece of ass, you want me to talk to it? Then she did anyway. "The deep parts of the isles are spawning ground for brakfish. It's near spawning time."

Tao-Jin tilted his head.

"What Dayva means," Virtue said, "is that salvage isn't usually a fish-fighting danger sport and she's no harpoonist."

He leaned forward, frowning, moved one hand in a gesture that echoed into her memory. "So the fish are dangerous?"

Dayva laughed.

"The brakfish," Virtue said, "is a monster of ichthyofauna, a speciation unique to Samjadsit Station, one which no one knows or claims the breeding and introduction of. The Fortunate Isles are brakfish spawning grounds."

Dayva rolled her eyes at Virtue's imitation of a tourist kive and Tao-Jin James smiled.

"Brakfish grow three times bigger than the *Artace*, and wily with it." Virtue found she had to look away from James' smile. She gestured. "Teeth long as my forearm. There are hunting regattas every year, people coming from all over to kill the unexpected miracle of accidental evolution."

"Usually," Dayva added, "some one or two hapless humans die in the course of the hunting, too."

"So that's a yes," Tao-Jin concluded. "And they're from the same place as this dust." He glanced out toward the isles.

"Maybe that's why *Azul* wants some." Dayva rose to lean near Tao-Jin and peer into the wind. She looked like an icon, with her short white hair and long dark self.

"Why?" Tao-Jin asked.

"To grow something prodigiously large." She raised one elegant hand, graceful bones turning, and put inflection on her words, drawling a bit. Tao-Jin's gaze followed her hand, then he laughed. They all laughed.

For all the universe like friends on a joy spin, Virtue thought and then her thoughts snagged on the shiral in Tao-Jin James's pocket. She wondered if she ought to listen to it. Later, she decided, because the air felt good and Horatio's voice would take all the joy out of it.

They hit the outer isles shortly after the core went to ninety-five percent polar for station night. The intense radiance melted from the upcurve, fading to a soft, mellow limning; illumination left the water, the solar relays giving only a faint veining of wispy fire to the dark.

Tao-Jin James had been studying Virtue, surreptitiously. He met her gaze, though, when she turned her most impassive stare on him. Eventually he lowered his eyes.

Dayva slowed the *Artace* as the isles rose around them. The hover boat's night light picked out the bristling shapes of ranga trees and formstone monoliths in the dark, one after another, an endless-seeming depth of them hinted at beyond its scope. The waterways narrowed. Insects spoke from within dense copses. A night bird swept from one isle to another, long silvery feathers briefly etched from the darkness.

Samjadsit Station was large enough, and one of the system's planets near enough, that the Coreyal possessed tides. The station's tide and spin motion stabilization systems – what Virtue thought of as the slosh compensators – were in a permanent state of repair and adjustment. There was a betting pool, on the docks, long standing, on whether and when it would be the erosion or the slosh that sent the station critical.

The scents on the Coreyal's back were never those of a planetary sea. For one thing, the Coreyal was fresh water, not salt; but there was a dense, overcharged feeling to the air Virtue had never known on another station, nor on Piranesi, the planet she left when she was fifteen. Where Tao-Jin James had lately come from, emissary of her brother, who held the strings to a fortune she hadn't touched since leaving, and – he thought – to things by which he could call her back.

The *Artace* tracked the specs Dayva had fed to comp until the numbers ran out. Full nav shifted to Virtue's rudderpad.

"Watch for a jut of formstone that looks like a fat woman," General had said, lying in his bed, shaping the air with one hand. His other hand, and the rest of him, was looped, plugged, or cybered into various bio support. His voice wheezed out, soft and fragile as ancient cloth. "Just after the breakaway – that comes up sudden-like. Narrow waters there. Skinnier than the Drift Witch's gullet. Then comes the inlet, all covered over with ranga branches. Skinny, skinny – hard to get through. She'll groan at you, but the *Artace* can do, if any can."

They were in narrow channels now, ranga and other flora, colourless pale in the *Artace's* light, rising to either side, closing above in places.

"Dayva, slow her to point five and disengage the hovers."

Dayva didn't move for a moment, then said quietly, stating the obvious, "That means setting down in the water."

"Yes."

"That'll –"

"Yes."

She muttered, but turned back to comp and did it. The hover turbs slowed, disengaged, and the *Artace* set down gently in a puff of air and a slap of water. Then it was the low hum of the engines, and the slip of water across the hull.

Tao-Jin James looked out into the isles, intent. Virtue could see his nostrils flare as he took in the unfamiliar scents. The posture was echo, mirage. Hair shorter than James had ever kept his. He was younger than her memory of James.

None of that mattered.

General's breakaway loomed, and just beyond it, hidden by a curve of ranga branches and a swarming of vines, his formstone fat woman loomed, a giant figure of rock, seeming to leer at them as they passed. The *Artace's* light passed right over the inlet beyond it. Invisible, if you weren't looking.

Manoeuvring the *Artace* into a passage she could only take on faith to actually be there, Virtue grimaced as ranga roots groaned against the hull, leaf and branch scratching and whining over the upper carapace. It went on for long moments, her hand tense on the rudder, sweat dripping down her sides. The *Artace* could lead with any end of her curve-framed self, nimble as hover ships came, but a root or vine in the engines would be bad, especially in brakfish waters. Dayva bent over comp; the ship bucked and creaked until, with a final groan, they were through. Both Virtue and Dayva breathed out, relieved.

Skinny passage for a bit, then the channel opened out, widened, deepened, and they were slipping down a tunnel made incandescent by the hover boat's beam.

"Kill the light, Dayva."

She did and it was suddenly very dark, the five percent of relayed sun's light that filtered through the night polar blocked here by the thickness of roots below, branches above. The *Artace's* running lights, motes of yellow reflection on the water, didn't touch the darkness of the isles.

They drifted in the dark, silent. Slowly, here and there on either side, something began to singe at the edges of their sight: a burning of blue threads and embers in the depths of the isles. More and more, until there was enough of the blue glow to see the suggestion of ranga trunks and formstone shapes. Virtue locked the rudder.

Awareness of his presence was like heat on her skin – she couldn't help herself. She looked over at Tao-Jin. His eyes were wide, lips parted. See the universe's many wonders, adventure and excitement, you bet. Then he shook his head, at some thought, turned to look at her. "Dust?"

"Dust."

"It looks like something out of an Irdish fable."

She found she had nothing to say to that and turned away to prep the equipment. Dayva set the anchor and started lowering the skiff to the water, the crank whining softly.

Virtue pulled a duck suit over her jump, belted it, hung a palm flash and a catchnet containing three preserving boxes and a scraping tool to the belt; last, she tucked the suit's long gloves into the belt, leaving the filter hood down around her shoulders. Dust

was toxic in its unprocessed state.

"Thirty minutes," Dayva said. "Then you're back here."

"Forty-five." She slid over the side and climbed down, jumping the last step off the ladder to land in the skiff. Now she could feel the water under her, close and alive in a way it never was on a hover. Over the *Artace's* hull edge, two faces peered down at her, Dayva mostly just white hair and brows.

"Don't forget the hood, Virtue," she gestured.

Virtue grunted, but her attention drifted to the figure beside Dayva. "My brother send you to talk me into going back to Piranesi?"

"He sent me to bring you the shiral. But – yes, he asked me to try." He hesitated for a second, like he was going to say more, then didn't.

"And you don't know why he might have chosen you – someone I don't know?"

Tao-Jin shook his head. "Horatio just said – I might do." His voice carried softly, so, so familiar Virtue forgot to breath until her chest hurt. "It was free passage off Piranesi," he said. "I'd never have afforded it on my own."

She wished he was telling the truth, but knew he wasn't. "When I get back," she said, "I want a better reason than that. You think about it."

Dayva shifted beside him, looking nervously up and down the channel. "Virtue – over the side of the hull isn't the place for this conversation." She waved her hands in a shooing motion, looking like a witch doing incantation in the blue light. "Get moving."

Tapping a code into the skiff's rudderpad to unlock it, Virtue set one palm to its surface. The skiff parted water. A short, silent, gliding while later it bumped up against the jagged formstone that passed for a shore. She knotted a line to a low hanging branch. One glance back to the *Artace*, the two faces, distant in the dim, still watching her.

She wondered what they'd talk about, and what Dayva made of the whole thing. The things she'd never told Dayva – anyone. General knew, some of it, but the old man had figured it out for himself, knowing a thing or two about the trade on Piranesi. With these thoughts for company, she headed into the ranga copse, ducking branches as she went. It was hard to gauge where the dust was, its burning blueness seeming to float in the darkness, fooling about with the distances. Shining a light on it made dust disappear – poof, nothing there. Dust salvage was strictly a night cycle activity.

Climbing over roots and formstone she could barely see, the roots smoothly gnarled, the stone cool and rough beneath her hands, the mineral scent of stone and soil was in her nose, and the blue burnings swam at the edges of her sight, beginning to seem more and more like ghost fire in her head.

Then she put her duck suited foot down in the ghost fire, slipped and caught herself. A little cloud of blue sizzled up into the air.

A cache of dust spread around her, in the ranga roots, over the soil, in the crevices of the formstone. Belatedly, she remembered to draw the filter hood over her head, pull on the gloves. The sound of her own breath filled Virtue's ears; the hood's disinfectant smell, that made her want to sneeze or retch, burned in her throat.

General had explained the collection of dust in detail – along with gifting her this location, held secret to himself for half his lifetime. Dust was found mostly in tiny caches, little bits of the stuff that amounted to no more than a palmful. Most of the known salvage spots were scraped clean.

Virtue was standing in an unbelievable cache.

Preserving boxes set out and scraping tool in hand, she dug the thin layer of blue fire off a root, scooping it into the first of the boxes. Fibrous when the tool first went in, on contact with it the

stuff mutated into a clinging, viscous dust.

By the time the third box was filled with oily, burning blue dust, her skin was sticky with sweat, jump clinging beneath the duck suit. She shook out a cramp in her hand and a twinge in her shoulder. Three boxes full and there was plenty of dust left among the roots, over the soil and formstone.

The lid on the last box sealed with a hermetic hiss and Virtue loaded up to go, the catchnet swinging heavy. Midway back, sudden light leaned through the ranga trees and disappeared the dust – Dayva's way of calling time.

At isle's edge, the skiff waited, bumping roots on a gulp of disturbed water. Virtue's skin prickled and she surveyed the area, but the channel was flat again, netted by the white and gold blaze of the *Artace's* main and running lights.

Dayva, with Tao-Jin James lending a hand, hauled the skiff up, rivulets streaming off it in luminous beaded strings. Setting the catchnet on the deck, Virtue stripped off the duck suit and gloves and dropped them in the detam unit. A bitter, oily smell clung to the suit and lingered in the air.

"This it?" Dayva looked down at the three preserving boxes in the catchnet.

"That's it." They exchanged a silent look. Sitting on the deck was a fortune. More scrip than they might have expected to earn off a job in twenty years.

And there was Tao-Jin James, unknown quantity, in and of whom Virtue suspected any number of things. He stood by the dripping skiff, watching them. Virtue couldn't tell what she was thinking – wasn't, maybe. Not, Athra knew, with any portion of her anatomy that thought clearly.

Coming back through the narrow inlet, roots scraping, leaves scratching, hull groaning, tension rode Virtue with steel talons in her shoulders. Tao-Jin leaned over the edge, observing the backwash.

Then they were through, back into the narrow channel they'd come down earlier.

"Hover turbs?" Dayva wanted to know.

Virtue shook her head. "Wait till we get to wider passage. I don't want to risk her now."

The channel widened slightly. Then Virtue heard a sound, the ghost of a thump.

"What was that?" Tao-Jin asked. He peered off what was currently the stern. It came again, under the engine's low hum, a ghost of a sound, like something big moving water.

"Dayva –"

"Yeah," she said, fingers moving quickly over comp. They gained speed in suddenly rolling water.

A distinct thump, then, to that portion of the ship under water, like distant, wrong direction thunder. The *Artace* rocked.

The brakfish rose, off to port, a great shifting just under the water's surface as it turned back toward them, scales sheened and reflective, an impressive roll of water cascading from a flip of tailfin big as the *Artace*.

"Engaging hover turbs." Dayva didn't ask if it was okay now.

Just as they gained hover, the brakfish bumped the *Artace* again. The hover turbs went offline and the ship tilted crazily, sending Virtue, Tao-Jin James, and the heavy boxes of dust tumbling across the deck. Dayva hung on to comp with both hands as the *Artace* hit the water hard, half on her side, then bobbed back.

Flashes of pain as Virtue took the hull hard in one shoulder, then one of Tao-Jin's elbows in her side. She got a grip on the hull's

edge and pulled herself up in time to see a great shimmer-scaled monstrosity rising out of the Coreyal, water streaming back from a mouth full of teeth.

Teeth definitely longer than her forearms.

The fish dove into them again, screech of those teeth across the hull and again they rocked hard.

"Virtue!" Dayva yelled and flung the harpoon bow at her. The alloy frame hit one palm; she let go of the hull to scramble for it, then wedged herself into one of the seating hollows. Dayva was trying to get some manoeuvring room as Virtue pried off the safety, loaded a dart from the chamber and sighted toward the water as the brakfish came round for another pass.

She squeezed the trigger; the shock of recoil punched through her. The dart sailed through the air to reek no more damage than a rip in the flirting tailfin. Then she had to hang on through another charge. Her hip took the brunt of the hull this time and she almost went over, drowning in a wave of water and losing track of up from down. A hand got hold of her jump and hauled her back. James.

He ripped the harpoon out of her hands, turned, sighted, and shot as the brakfish leapt, streaming water. The harpoon stood out of the centre of one wide, glassy dark eye as the fish floated on the air a moment before them.

Then another screech of teeth, the ship rocked, and they were thrown back under another drenching. Virtue came up onto her knees, coughing, and found the harpoon under her hands. James's clone was climbing to his feet over across the deck. She was about to give him the 'poon back, considering his skill with it, when Dayva said, in a tense voice, "Virtue."

She pointed: another fish was coming down the narrow channel. Another fish.

"Bloody void," Virtue breathed.

James tugged the harpoon from her grip and fell to his knees,

sighting over the hull. Rather than watch to see what damage the clone might do with the 'poon, Virtue flung around to scramble at one of the seat hollow storage areas. Her fingers found what she wanted quickly, two small chem charges, for blasting in salvage work.

She turned with one in her hand to see the first brakfish falling back to the water with two more 'poon shafts bristling from the same eye as the first. The first fish hit the water heavily, suddenly graceless, just as the second came for its go at them, mouth open, long teeth bristling. Her focus narrowed down as her fingers primed the charge. The fish rose and she flung the charge in a sure arc, straight for the dark behind long ivory teeth.

A low-pitched whine filled the air, and before the *Artace* had stopped rocking from the last attack, the second brakfish was blown out of the water. A breathless moment later, large pieces of fish rained down. Backsplash washed across the deck, chunky with dead fish and blood; the deck streamed water back into the Coreyal. The smell was atrocious.

Dayva still clung to comp, wet and coughing. James was just gaining hands and knees, having been washed clear across the deck. Virtue, thrown to her back, rolled, found the harpoon bow under one hand, gripped it as she rose, barely conscious of doing so.

She eyed the channel, dripping, her thoughts running ahead and behind, circling.

"Dayva?"

"Working on it."

"What's happening?" James coughed the words up with water, climbing to his feet.

"Mother –" Dayva pounded on the comp console.

Virtue's jump clung uncomfortably, her hair plastered to her cheeks, down her neck. "Someone put a lure signal on us," she said softly.

Dayva looked up. "What? How do you figure that?"

"Brakfish don't hunt in pairs. And they don't usually hunt ships



unless the ships have a lure signal on them – like they use in the regattas. So, someone planted a lure on us. It's the only explanation makes sense."

She saw the clone's hand go to the hip pocket of his drenched jump, where the shiral was, a look of horror crossing his face.

As they left the dead brakfish, one floating, a huge raft of scale, the other so much flesh and gore in the water, further and further behind, Virtue regarded Tao-Jin James, standing on her deck, watching her.

"Are you going to shoot me?" he asked.

She cast a blank look down at the harpoon bow still in her grip. Ignore him, she decided, with a desperate, half-rational thought.

"How's it coming, Dayva?" She went past James to the skiff, unlocked the crank with a savage, left-handed yank, started to lower it. She could smell her own sweat, in the wet jump, and the lubricant in the crank mechanism. Red, red, red, the edges of things, and the centre was going dark.

"About ready to go online."

Virtue heard Dayva, distantly, through deep static.

The skiff hit water with a splash and she waved the harpoon at James's clone, gesturing down to the skiff she could barely see through red darkness. "Get in."

Dayva looked over.

He lifted a hand, lowered it, shook his head once. "I didn't know about the tracer."

The harpoon was slick with sweat in her grip. "Get. In."

"Virtue –"

"Dayva, shut up."

The clone shook his head again. "Captain –"

It's for your own damn good, she thought, but couldn't verbalize it. There was too much red; she was going to break apart around it. Holding herself in place was like holding – she didn't know, but it was hard and it hurt and she didn't know if she could do it if he didn't –

"Virtue, what the void are you –" Dayva began, but she put her hand on Virtue's arm and for a breath, just the thought of a breath, Virtue stopped holding it in and there was a loud crack of sound, a surprised sound –

– then a feel of wind across her wet skin –

– and Dayva was sitting on the deck a few feet away, looking surprised, one long-fingered hand spread over her cheek.

And oh drift, oh void, no –

– and she clamped it back down and forced one sentence out of her mouth. "Get him off my ship."

Something passed between the clone and Dayva; he set the shiral on the deck and scrambled over the side into the skiff.

He was a dot behind them on the Coreyal, left behind in the dark, when Virtue thought to unprime the harpoon and set it back in the rack. Her hand ached, but it was distant.

There was real quiet over in the direction of Dayva, the noisy kind of quiet. After a while, though, she said, "He doesn't know the code for the rudder."

"He should have thought of that before," Virtue answered.

She picked up the shiral in a hand that only shook slightly. First she found the tiny transceiver that was emitting the infrasonic brakfish lure, pulled it off and ground it into the deck under one foot.

Then she pressed her thumb into the centre of the shiral's cloudy opal eye. It identified her chemical signature and a line of light chorused through the sphere as it cleared to a brilliant, hard-edged depth in which her brother Horatio appeared, a perfect tiny

miniature in her palm.

"Virtue." Just that, for a moment, his tiny, perfect image regarding her. "I'd like to you to come home now. I have some reorganizing to do among the associations." It was his voice out of the shiral, as if he were there, clipped, creamy tones. It made the skin on her back twitch.

"Your unique gifts can't be comfortable off Piranesi. Surely you see that you're better off here. Eventually someone is going to put you down like a rabid dog. Oh, and if you haven't figured it out already, James Twelve brought a nice little fish lure with him. I hope you don't kill him too messily – or, I'm sorry, have you already?"

"Hold." She set the sphere down, carefully, though there was red rage in her eyes and arms, tidal as the Coreyal's engineered sea. Red as Horatio's reorganizing of Piranesi's associations.

Several breaths strung like water on air, in that dark, bloody, shoreless place. After a minute she could see again. Her hands shook as if with palsy, and familiar pain twisted, bitter with the unreleased Rage that had been building for the last half hour. That she hadn't unleashed on Tao-Jin James. Horatio would be amazed and chagrined. Now, though, her hands were shaking, hard. The red washed slowly from the air. She was crying, it hurt so much.

He'd wanted her to unleash it on James. Again.

That came clear in the lucid moments that usually followed a Rage. If she'd torn James's clone apart, come out of the fit to see that – Horatio would have had her. Murder. Off Piranesi such things didn't go unremarked.

At the very least she would have been sent to an Aggregate stew; more likely there'd have been regen for the emotional wreckage killing James again would have left her.

Or shipped back to Piranesi, where she'd be safe from the retributions of relatively sane society. Horatio would have been sure to have that option covered.

It would have been the second time she killed James.

It gave Virtue a moment of cold joy to know how it must vex Horatio that when she'd skipped out she'd taken her own genetic file and left him with nothing.

"That was your brother?" Dayva had set comp on auto and come to lean against the slope of the *Artace's* upper carapace. A puffy swelling marred the dark skin of her angled cheek where Virtue had hit her. Her voice was stiff, eyes slanted away.

Virtue considered her, let her own gaze slide away. "Rearranging the world from his little gravity sink, yes."

Dayva was thinking, one silvery brow lifted high, still not looking at Virtue, anger and hurt shading her eyes. "You're engineered?"

"Yes."

"To what?"

"Kill."

Dayva barked a laugh, then gave a sharp shake of her head.

"Waste of genetic tinkering. Plenty of ways to kill without making a specialty human to do it. Why?"

"Have you ever been to Piranesi, Dayva?"

"Is that the answer?"

Virtue nodded.

"I see." Maybe she did. "You really going to leave that kid out there in the skiff?"

Virtue shifted away, shook her head.

"What about the brakfish?"

Stretching her arms, shoulders cracking, Virtue shook her hands out. "If he's quiet, they won't notice him." She turned to Dayva and

said, softly, "I'm sorry."

Dayva looked at her finally. "Explain it to me." She didn't need to add, or forget this partnership; the words were clear as day without the speaking.

"The Rage is triggered by certain sets of circumstances, particular goads or spurs. Evidence of betrayal will do it. It's...very hard...to contain it once it's triggered. It's supposed to be impossible. You interrupted me at the wrong moment." She shrugged one shoulder. "I'm sorry, Dayva. I..." Falling silent, she looked away. "I'd never... not for the world."

Dayva shifted. Then she said, "Don't do it again. Ever."

"Never." Virtue considered whether she could actually promise that, then said, "Dayva, maybe...maybe it would be better if you found another gig."

Dayva folded her arms, stared out into the dark over the water. "I'll keep that in mind. Stay for now. My choice." The staccato statements drifted through soft air. Then she said, "Virtue, not my business, maybe – but I talked to that kid some while you were down in the ranga digging dust. I don't think he knew about the tracer. Or what it is that's got you so kinked about him."

"He knows – that, at least, he knows. He must. He was raised in my brother's household and he was getting paid, by my brother. About the tracer, you're right, probably not."

Dayva snorted. "So he's not a saint. What is it about him, anyway? Still not my business, but you did nearly get me killed – and you hit me. You owe me."

"Slim payment."

"I'm a philosophical girl. That's what you like about me."

Virtue stared down at her hands, still trembling. "I loved someone named James Xu. My brother didn't like the influence James had with me. So he triggered the Rage with the original James in the kill path. Tao-Jin is one of James's clones."

Silence, the slur of water under hovers, race of wind. Her hair was almost dry, whipping into her face.

"Hido has said that the more primitive human chemical responses are at war with our most advanced bio-technologies," Dayva said, apropos of what, Virtue wasn't entirely sure.

"The esteemed Hido has his philosophical head up his ass." She wiped her hair back and twisted it into a knot. "Anyway, Horatio secured the rights to James's gene set when he saw what a good control for yours truly the model was. James died...I killed him. But Horatio keeps bringing him back."

She glanced at Dayva as she fisted and stretched her hands, shook them out once more. "He uses them like one-shot kive chips, disposable, trying to get me to come back to be his personal berserker."

"Mother void," Dayva said, and that was all for a good minute or two. Then, "But the Megrath Reversal overturned ownership rights on adult-formed clones."

"Except on Piranesi."

"Oh." That probably told her more about Piranesi than she wanted to know. "So what happened to the other eleven?"

Virtue closed her eyes, opened them, said evenly, "He tortured one and sent me kives of it. Others might not have been a close enough match, psychologically, or they failed before full realization." She rubbed at the back of her neck, the corded muscles tense. "There's a sixty to seventy percent failure rate."

The Coreyal sped beneath them, silver from their light, away into lucid dark and the upcurve of distance. The ache in her hip and shoulder, and one on her hand from hitting Dayva, all throbbed

dully. She needed food and was starting to shudder with that need; the Rage used carbs like air.

"You a clone, Virtue?"

She blinked at Dayva. "No."

"You sure?"

"Yes." She frowned, her voice going stiff. "I'm quite sure."

Dayva chewed her lip. "Maybe that kid knows he's a clone, Virtue, maybe not. And even if he does – he didn't know about the tracer."

"About the tracer...no, he didn't," she said, finally thinking it through. "If Horatio meant me to kill him, he wouldn't have told him much. James is a smart set. He'd have tracked this whole encounter differently if he'd known. He'd have run the second he was off Piranesi."

She picked up the shiral, turned it once in her fingers; it had gone cloudy opal again. She heaved it overhand with a grunt, didn't listen for the splash. Maybe a brackfish would eat it.

They went back for him the next day.

It was full day. The light and heat bouncing back and forth between the water and station sky made it brutal hot at mid-cycle. You couldn't drink Coreyal water, first and most frequent warning a tourist got.

His skin was burned, lips swollen slightly; he sat in the bottom of the skiff, knees up, arms loosely clasping them, head down, shirt off, wet and draped over him. He looked up only slowly when Virtue caught the skiff with a hook. She tossed him a water flask and leaned above him on the *Artace's* deck. Dayva was over by comp, listening.

"You think of a better answer yet?" She watched him remember what she meant, and their words echoed in her own head.

"And you don't know why he might have chosen you – someone I don't know?"

"Horatio just said – I might do... It was free passage off Piranesi," he said. "I'd never have afforded it on my own."

"When I get back," she said, "I want a better reason than that..."

Now he drank some of the water, squinting up at her through swollen lids. He said slowly, "I knew. About you and my... predecessor. Not that Horatio ever told me. Remember Famke?"

Virtue nodded.

"Well," he coughed, drank another sip of water, wiped his face with trembling fingers. "She told me, some of it. So, I knew. And I knew your brother wasn't sending me for any reason that would make you happy. But...I never let on...how much I just wanted to escape. I was a very obedient clone." The bitterness sounded almost mild.

"You could have just run, not brought me his message at all."

He cast another look up at her. "I was curious. About you. The story Famke told me..."

"You didn't know about the tracer?"

He shook his head, swallowed. "No. Void – I'd never have...No."

Virtue flicked her fingers against the hull. "How long have you been, Tao-Jin James?"

"Ten years."

"What's your cell age?"

He touched a blister on his lower lip, gave her an opaque look. "Twenty-five."

"Does my brother have a hold on you?"

"Besides money, power, and registry title?"

"Title's not good off Piranesi."

"Then, no." He blinked, then grinned with cracked lips. "Not that I know of, anyway."

Virtue nodded and reached a hand down to him. "Come aboard, then. And welcome." ■

INTERMISSION

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No one slept well that night.

A little after three a.m., as a cold whispering rain fell over steep-gabled slate, husbands silently pulled wives close in the clammy darkness. Nursemaids rose from narrow beds to check bundled babes; massive-headed mastiffs whined by banked hearthfires as household cats insinuated between dream-running paws; and in their warm, summer-smelling loose boxes, arch-necked carriage horses stamped and rolled white-rimmed eyes, leaning against the barred partitions to press flank to flank. The City of New Amsterdam tossed restlessly.

Detective Crown Investigator Abigail Irene Garrett had no one to turn to for comfort on a dismal night in April. When the chill slipped like an unwelcome guest between sheet and featherbed and her faded blue eyes came open, Garrett's hand crept automatically to the pistol under her pillow. Her half-awakened intellect checked her wards and guards. Intact. Despite the muffled impact of her heart against her ribcage, she was as alone as she should have been.

The pearl grip cool and heavy in her hand, Garrett sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of her black wood bedstead. Her left hand resting on the ornate spiral of a bedpost, she ran through her wards again. At her feet, her ragged patchwork terrier whined into the darkness.

"Hush, Mike. I know."

Nothing. She slipped her revolver back under the pillow and stood, belting a cream lace negligee over her nightgown. Her wand – ebony capped in silver, as long as the span from elbow to fingertip – lay on the nightstand, and this she lifted and touched to the wick of a gnarled beeswax stump. The candle sparked into light and Garrett drew a long, tight breath, trying to ease the clenching in her belly. Thirty years in the service of the Crown, and she had never felt such apprehension.

Setting her wand aside, she crossed rug-scattered tile to the credenza, where she poured herself whisky without water and sipped it slowly. Mike scampered close at her heels. She opened the casement one-handed, rainbeaded glass icy on her fingertips, and leaned out into a gaslamp-jeweled night. Falling water trickled down her neck, washed her face like tears. The woeful exhalation of a late-arriving steamship, a packet boat from England or places more distant, hung on the night. The black stone window ledge gouged a cold furrow across her belly. Mike shoved dust mop paws against the wall, too small to reach the window ledge. She reached down and ruffled his ears.

When the first inch of liquor warmed the chill from her shoulders, Abigail Irene Garrett straightened from the window, unwound white fingers from her tumbler, and began to dress.



"Grisly," Garrett commented – an uncharacteristic sentiment.

And an understatement. The rain had slowed to a mist, but the flagstoned walk lay puddled under her feet. Her eyes narrowed as she gathered the navy-blue skirts of her walking dress in her hands. She lifted them clear of the bloodstained stoop of a wide-fronted three-story brownstone as she minced up the steps. Stringy, clotted runnels dripped down them like paint.

She glanced at uniformed representatives of the Colonial Police and two of the Duke's city Guard, looking apprehensive and outnumbered. "Who can tell me what happened here?"

A patrolman stepped forward, avoiding the DCI's gaze – and avoided following the direction of it when she turned her back on him, bending toward the body crumpled against the scored wooden door. She couldn't keep her boots out of the clotted blood, but uniformed officers had already walked through it. *And a detective or two who should have known better, I warrant*, she thought. *Well, we're not all cut out to be sorcerers.*

She glanced over her shoulder, pinning the hapless patrolman on a needle-pointed gaze, wondering which of her notorieties occupied his attention. *Perhaps it's just the scent of blood paling his face.* "Well?" *Perhaps.*

"DCI, I was first on the scene."

"And?" Garrett drew herself upright, ash-laced blonde hair falling in a wing across her forehead. *Don't smile at him, Abby Irene, or you'll never get another word of sense out of him, and he might very well piss himself. And you know Division would have something to say about that – disgrace to the uniform and so on.* The thought quivered her lips. She fought the smile to a standstill and converted it into an expectant frown.

"He was dead when I arrived, DCI. I heard the screaming..."

"I see." She let him see her lean forward to note the number on his shield. "Did you identify the bystanders? At what time?"

He took a half-step back. "Sunrise, ma'am. Perhaps an hour ago. There were no witnesses present when I arrived."

"No one came to his assistance? You heard screaming –"

The officer trained his gaze on the blood-spattered leaves of a just-budding rose alongside the wrought-iron fence. "It was over quickly. Ma'am. As I arrived, the neighbors began coming out of their houses. I was only around the corner."

"No one has touched the body since?" *Poor lad. He couldn't have been more than fifteen. What was he doing out so early in the rain?*

"Officers entered. But they climbed through the window."

She could see that from the footprints. Thankfully they had sense enough not to move the body to open the door. Garrett planned to go inside once she had finished her work with the victim. She was too old to climb through windows in the rain.

I wonder what's become of his spine? She leaned forward to examine the damage. *The skull is cracked, and I would wager the poor lad's brains have been scooped out. If a human being could do that, I'd say so violent an attack was personal.* She crouched to investigate a scatter of pale flecks on the steps, like a splash of milk frozen in place.

The patrolman swallowed loudly. Red hair and freckles, couldn't have been four years older than the victim. Despite herself, Garrett took pity on him. "What's your name, officer?"

"Forester," he replied. His face gleamed white around a fevered flush spotting the center of each cheek.

She sighed, seeing her own imperious face reflected in his eyes. Twenty years ago, she had been thought a great beauty. Boys like Forester had been so far beneath her notice that she had not even realized it was possible for them to *have feelings*. *Times change, Abby Irene.* "I am a sorcerer, lad, not a cannibal. You did as well as could be expected." She turned away.

"Ma'am?"

"Dismissed," she confirmed. "Go back to your dispatch for debriefing, Forester. You were right to call me in. This is a matter for the Crown." She knew perfectly well that the summons had come from the city Guard, and not from the Mayor's Colonial Police, but it was polite to lie.

Sometimes – but only some times – Garrett could almost admit a sympathy for the Mayor and his push for home rule. Her true loyalties, however, lay with the Crown. And the Duke.

Except, she mused, bootheels clicking as she made her way back to her waiting carriage, the Crown was an ocean away on the other side of her self-imposed exile, and in these days of threatened hostilities with the French and Iroquois it seemed to prefer to forget the Colonies existed. And the Duke, loyal Patriot that he was, had problems of his own.

Still, it rankled: in London, she could have counted on a specialist sorcerer and at least one additional DCI for so gruesome a murder. In the entire reach of the Colonies, from the Atlantic to the Iroquois territories West of the Appalachians, Garrett's only colleagues were in Boston and Philadelphia. One doddered through the closing years of a white-bearded wizard's career; the other was a puling idiot who never would have achieved his Th.D without judiciously applied nepotism.

Yes, unequivocally – and especially since the Iron Queen's death and her eldest son's succession – Garrett was on her own.

Her driver, huddled miserable on the box, touched his cap. The renewed patter of rain on the cobbles told her to hurry. Uniformed officers held the gathering crowd back while Garrett rooted in her blue velvet carpetbag, kept dry in the enclosed coach. Quickly, she found what she needed and returned.

It was nasty work, sketching a circle around the corpse, and the hem of her dress was black with sucking mud and daubed red as well by the time she closed it. Renewed murmurs ran through the onlookers. Garrett shook her head, not troubling herself to look up. *They can't have only now figured out who I am.*

But deliberate steps clipped along the blood soaked walk, and a silken voice close behind her said, "Crown Investigator."

Garrett pinched the bridge of her nose, thinking very hard about the silver flask of brandy in her carpetbag. She knotted the circle off so that it would hold during her distraction and turned to face the intruder. "I see the officers recognized you, Viscount," she said, briefly distracted by hazel eyes under a fall of brown-black hair. Princely cheekbones, a caballero's noble nose, and the sensual lip

of a Spanish aristocrat. Garrett bit down on a sigh.

"Please," said the notorious amateur detective, extending his grey-gloved hand, voice melodious with the interwoven tones of his native language. "So lovely a lady must by all means call me Sebastien. Besides, your English titles are so confusing."

Garrett transferred her wand to her left hand and allowed him to bend over her right. Much as she despised the man, she had to admit to a certain agreeable shiver when his lips brushed her glove. Don Sebastien de Ulloa straightened and smiled, gesturing to the mangled remains of the boy with the tip of his walking stick. "And so, my dear investigator – what have we here?"

Garrett pursed her lips in frustration, but kept her voice level. "I'm not certain yet," she said. "I've just finished containing the scene. There are a few interesting anomalies..."

"That is candle wax." Don Sebastien leaned forward, laying a hand on Garrett's arm to steady himself away from the circle.

"It appears to be," she answered, shifting from the touch. "Interesting, is it not? Other than the mud and blood, it is obvious that the doorstep and facade were immaculately kept; probably scrubbed daily, if their housekeeper is anything like my Mary. So the wax can be no older than a day."

Don Sebastien was no sorcerer, and she largely ignored him while she dipped mingled salt and lampblack out of a little pouch and spread those around the circle, pretending she did not notice the cold water dripping down her collar. Don Sebastien seemed untroubled. "What intrigues me, Crown Investigator, is the swiftness of the attack. Have you eliminated a human agency?"

She tucked the little pouch into her pocket. "I've ruled out nothing," she answered, feeling as if he tested her. "But I must admit, I can see no way around suspicions of sorcery. Unless it was a beast." She let her voice drop. "In which case, we can expect further attacks."

Don Sebastien pursed sensual lips. Rain splattered from the brim of his hat. "May I call you Lady Abigail? It is so much less unwieldy than 'Crown Investigator.'"

"My name is 'Abigail Irene'. And I would prefer to be addressed by the title appropriate to the situation. 'Garrett' will do if you are pressed for time, Don Sebastien."

"I meant no disrespect. DCI, have you considered some of the more unpleasant possibilities?"

"Such as?"

"Were-thing. Wampyr. Summoned demon, improperly bound."

"What would you consider the more *pleasant* possibilities, Don Sebastien? A deranged lunatic with the strength to peel a man's spine out of his back?"

"Ah. I take your point, Investigator. Although I admit, I am still exceedingly curious about the candle wax."

Garrett chuckled. "So am I, Don Sebastien. So am I. And curious as well, where the other residents have gotten off to. Shall we proceed?"

Once the coroner had moved the body, Don Sebastien wrapped the brass door-pull – which had already been examined – carefully in his handkerchief and tugged it open, stepping aside so that Garrett could precede him. "Crown Investigator, may I join you?"

"Thank you, Don Sebastien. If you must, you may." She shook her gore-daubed skirts and knocked the worst of the mire from her boots before she crossed the threshold; it didn't help. Wet cloth still clung to her knees when she crouched. "Well."

Don Sebastien reached up and pulled a taper from the sconce upon the wall, keeping the drip shield at its base. He set it alight with a silver lighter, drawn from his coat pocket, and dropped

to one knee facing Garrett, tilting the candle to give her light. Shadows scrolled about them. "More candle-spatters," she said. "Beeswax, and a good quantity of it, too."

"Do you maintain your good opinion of the housekeeper?"

She lifted her chin and glanced around, hair moving against the nape of her neck. Don Sebastien's eyes were on the scrollworked secretary beside the door. Garrett reached out and ran a kid-gloved fingertip along its edges. She examined the results in the glow of the taper, which was of good enough quality not to drip even when he angled it. "Even the back is clean," she said. "And a family of some means, if they were spending so on candles. And *that* candle does not drip like this." She drew out a penknife and flaked a few dribs of wax into a glassine envelope.

"Your reputation does not do you justice," Don Sebastien said, and stood, offering Garrett his assistance. "The intruder's light, do you think?"

"If there was an intruder." His flesh was cool even through her glove. "Don Sebastien, you were too long in the rain."

"I am always cold," he answered, and released her lightly once her balance was sure. "The trail appears to lead this way. Shall we have a look upstairs, Crown Investigator?"

"By all means. Lead on, Lucifer." *Light-bearer.*

He laughed and held the candle high. "I have been called worse. You have noticed the angle of the drippings?"

"Of course," she answered. "They fell from the candle of someone leaving the house."

"Indeed." They entered the front room. He stood aside again, to allow her to precede him up the sweeping stair.

Very pretty. For a hobbyist. Does he think because a Crown Investigator is also a woman, she needs an expatriate Spaniard as her shadow to solve a murder? And then, since he was only looking at the back of her rain-wet head, she allowed herself a little, mocking smile. *Perhaps he's just hoping to catch a glimpse of your ankles.*

"There is more wax up the stair runner."

"And on the banister."

"And across the landing – interesting. The droplets crisscross the hall." She bent again, gesturing for the light. Don Sebastien was beside her as silently as a cat in his patent-leather boots, dabs of mud marring their mirror shine. "The intruder spent a fair amount of time here."

"Do you suppose he came in through an upstairs window? Two were open; strange on a stormy night."

"Do you suppose he was a *he*?" Garrett answered mildly, moving to the closest of the bedrooms, from which a cold draft flowed. The door stood open; mud on the threshold told her the officers had been through it, and she wished she knew if the door had been closed or open when they arrived.

She paused in the frame of the doorway, letting her eyes take in the room. A young man's, by the schoolbooks and fencing gear, and the bed had been slept in – disconsolately, judging by the crumpled and thrown-back covers and the disarray of the pillows. Unlike the downstairs entryway, there was light enough in this room to see the spatters of wax on the floor, although there was no candle in the holder by the bed.

A chill lifted the hair on Garrett's neck. She moved to the window, aware of Don Sebastien behind her, although the wide wooden boards scarcely seemed to flex under his weight. "Are you a swordsman, Don Sebastien?"

"A notorious one, in my youth," he answered, giving it the slight

inflection of a *double entendre*. Her lips twitched. She did not look, instead leaning down beside the window frame and tilting her head to examine it against the slanted light. The floor beneath was damaged, the wood already swollen from rain falling inside. That rain had washed away any traces which might have been on the windowsill; Garrett stared until her eyes crossed and found nothing. Still, her skin crawled.

"He is restless," Garrett said, straightening and stepping away from the casement. She whirled, noticing Don Sebastien's sudden stillness, as if he set himself for an attack. Garrett pulled her eyes from the Spaniard and paced quickly to the bed. "He rises. He –"

"– kindles a light," Sebastien interrupted. "There is a burnt match in the candle holder, and the box in the nightstand cubbyhole."

"Very good. Except he's neglected a candle –"

"– or perhaps he pulls the candle from the holder."

"To what purpose?"

"I do not know." Their eyes met, and Garrett released the deep-drawn breath she had been holding. *The thrill of the chase.*

"Were you restless last night, Don Sebastien?"

"I am always restless at night, DCI."

"Then perhaps –" she advanced with a firm step like a duelist's "– you would be better served at home, resting in your bed." She didn't smile to soften it, and again their gazes crossed. Garrett fancied she could hear the ring of steel. "This is still a Crown investigation, Viscount."

Don Sebastien reached up to tip his hat, which he had not removed when they stepped inside. "I am very restless," he answered. "And, too often, very bored. And I do not imagine that this is *anything* but your case, Crown Investigator."

"As long as you understand me."

She turned away and went to the window again. She was leaning out to grasp the edge of the casement with the intention of swinging it closed when he spoke again from close beside her. "Oh, never that, Abigail I –" His body struck hers a moment before she properly registered that he had stopped speaking mid-sentence, slamming her forward, belly against the windowsill and her arms flung out like a diver's. Her corset took the brunt of the impact, whalebone bruising her at belly and breast, and she shouted outrage and scrambled at rain-slick wood. She teetered, Don Sebastien's weight pinning her, and kicked wildly, expecting any moment to feel his hands on her ankles tilting her forward into a sickening, tumbling fall.

She didn't think the rose-bushes would break her fall enough to save her. Especially if she hit the fence. *Why would the Great Detective murder a wealthy East Side boy?* Amazed by the calm precision of her own thoughts even as she twisted, bringing her gloved hands up to fend him off. His strength was irresistible. He simply wrapped hands as hard as barrel-hoops around her wrists and –

– hauled her spluttering back into the room and down onto the floor. "Are you hit?" he asked, patting her cheek anxiously. His hat had tumbled off and fetched up in the far corner, and his glossy, hard-looking hair stood up in disheveled spikes.

"Hit?"

"The carriage –" He shook his head. "You didn't see." And rolled on his back, away from her, and raised his right hand to point across his face to the ceiling directly overhead. "There was a rifleman down on the street."

Detective Crown Investigator Garrett certainly knew the look of a fresh bullet-hole in plaster when she saw one. "Ah," she said quietly. "Someone must be taking an interest in the case."



A little before noon, Garrett marked time in the antechamber outside the Mayor's office, grateful at least for the chance to shed her soaked oilcloth. Although the rain had stopped falling and the clouds had thinned shortly before Don Sebastien took his leave, the afternoon promised a continuing overcast.

Blood and mud still smirched the hem of her walking dress, and it might have been politic to return to her rooms and change. However, his Lordship, Peter Eliot, Mayor of New Amsterdam, had made it known that he expected to see her with all deliberate speed, and far be it from her to think of preserving the man's prized Persian carpets under such circumstances. Garrett swallowed a pleased smile.

By the watch pinned to her bodice, she'd been waiting at least twenty minutes before the door opened and the Mayor's confidential secretary – a well-made young man with dark blue eyes, whom she noted appreciatively – gestured her in. Garrett smiled; she'd taken the opportunity to rifle his desk while he was away, and had one of his visiting cards slipped inside the cuff of her glove. *Simon LeMarque, M.Th.S. Another sorcerer. And French. How interesting. The Mayor must be more worried about the Duke and I than he admits. Although, given the number of times he's tried to – embarrass – us both, I shouldn't be surprised.*

She swept past Simon LeMarque, holding her soiled dress well aside, and glided to a halt before Peter Eliot's enormous mahogany desk. The Mayor didn't trouble himself to look up from the papers that occupied his attention, and Garrett gave her sodden skirts an extra shake to settle them. "Your Lordship."

Eliot glanced up. "I understand there was some trouble in the city this morning, Detective."

"Crown Investigator, sir," she answered. "And yes."

He nodded judiciously, setting his papers aside. "Have you identified a suspect yet? I'm under pressure from the press, you understand. The gruesome aspect of the murder..."

You blithering idiot, I've been at the crime scene for six hours. I've barely begun my investigation, and you know it. But he isn't a blithering idiot, and I'd better remember that. "Respectfully, sir, because of the possibly – *probably* – arcane nature of the crime, it's a Crown matter now. You shall have to address the press's inquiries to the Duke's office."

"I'd hate to have them jump to the conclusion that the Duke's officers are impeding a murder investigation."

Ah. The threat made manifest. "The Duke is quite capable of handling his own public affairs, your Lordship."

Eliot smiled, uncoiling from his desk. He was a long, narrow man, grey hair thinning at the top, waistcoat tight across the small bulge of his paunch. Probably not much older or taller than the intensely annoying Don Sebastien. Despite her professional dislike

for the so-called Great Detective, Garrett found herself comparing the Mayor unfavorably to the Spanish aristocrat. "Ah, yes, the Duke. Has he taken an interest, then?" Garrett didn't miss the jeweled-serpent glitter in the man's eyes.

She knew she was one of Richard's – the Duke's – biggest political weaknesses. And she suspected the Mayor knew as well, or at least suspected. *But he cannot prove a thing, and that is the important part. And my service record is impeccable, for all I am a woman.*

"I have yet to speak to him regarding the case, sir. Usually he prefers not to be involved until the evidence is more complete, and in any eventuality, I have not yet even had time to write up my notes. But you appreciate that I can discuss nothing relating to a Crown investigation with anyone who is not in my chain of command." *And here in the god-forsaken West, my chain of command begins and ends with the Duke. You have no power over me.*

Well, other than the power to endlessly complicate my life. With the exception of Garrett and the city Guard, New Amsterdam's law enforcement reported to the office of the Mayor. And Garrett desperately needed to keep her access to the resources of the Colonial Police.

"And I know you like to keep a very personal hand on your investigations, Detective...Crown Investigator."

Familiar ice stiffened Garrett's spine, and she let it freeze her professional smile on her face. "Surely, sir, I have no idea what you might be insinuating."

"Ah, of course not. You will keep me apprised?"

And that's what this is about. An offer to betray Richard for a place at Peter Eliot's right hand? Oh, how will I ever resist the temptation. Years of practice kept the ironic tinge from her voice. "Of course, your Lordship."

Eliot came around his desk and laid a hand on her upper arm, turning her gently toward the door. "I would be indebted to you, Lady Abigail. I hope you know how impressed we all are with your work. So many women consider themselves fit to fill any man's shoes – it is always refreshing to meet one who can actually do a job. There are always opportunities for people like you."

Ah, yes, the carrot and the stick. The touch, warm through damp cotton, made her skin crawl, and she was again moved to contrast the Mayor with Don Sebastien. She frowned, pushing disloyal images aside. *You despise the man, Abigail Irene.* The reminder amused her; she let that amusement color her tone. "You will be the third to know, your Lordship. Possibly the fourth."

That brought him up short, or perhaps he merely stumbled, spit-shined shoes catching on the nap of the richly knotted carpets. "The fourth?"

"Ah, yes," Garrett said, taking advantage of his momentary distraction to disengage her arm and break for the door with all the dignified haste she could muster. *Two years of finishing school not entirely wasted. At least I can manage an imperious exit.* "Don Sebastien de Ulloa appears to have interested himself in the case." *And he has no loyalty to the Duke, but neither bears he any love for you.*

It was too much to hope that the Mayor would not have her followed, so Garrett did exactly as he would expect. Resuming her carriage, the Crown Investigator gave instructions to her driver to wake her when they arrived at the Duke's residence, in Queens.

But she could not sleep. Somewhere along the way, the clouds broke and a slanted line of sunlight glanced off rain-frosted

stones, gilding the city. Garrett took a breath of cold air, rich with the promise of spring, and let it out again on a sigh. *That's what you do it for, Abby Irene, she thought. Seven million souls, thirty percent of the population of the Colonies, and the capitol of the British Protectorate of North America. So what if it's not London?*

She chuckled at the comparison. *Well, it's just not London. That's all. But you live with your decisions, Abigail Irene. And if living in the would-be-Plutocratic chaos of the Colonies is what it takes to fulfill your duty, so be it.*

After crossing the Elizabeth Bridge, her driver turned the rattling coach down Brewster Street, and Garrett smoothed her dress. The mud had somewhat dried; she slipped her gloves off, cracking the powder off her hem. Then she dug in her reticule for lotion to smooth her face and disguise her exhaustion. Not that she had anything to hide from Richard, Duke of New Amsterdam, but old habits died hard.

She was tugging the fingers of her gloves back into place when the carriage jolted to a halt on the gracious circular drive of the Duke's massive white Colonial. Garrett nodded coolly to the groom who rushed to hand her down, and made her way up the broad, shallow steps to the portico.

The Duke's servants opened the door before she reached the landing. They ushered her into Richard's study, where she shooed a two-hundred pound mastiff out of the loveseat and settled herself before the fire with a brandy from the sideboard. Candles blazed on the marble mantle; the gaslights were not lit. The fair-haired, fiftyish Duke himself joined her before she had halfway finished the glass.

She set it on an end table and would have stood, but he raised one hand and shook his head. "Keep your seat, Abby Irene. And finish your brandy. I can see that you need it." He poured a glass for himself before coming to sit beside her, curling his long legs to the side. His hair was wavy, silver at the temples and the nape, the rich ashen color of tree bark. She wanted to run her fingers through it, and instead she sipped her brandy.

"You can't be ready to make me a report on that murder yet," he said, leaning toward her.

She gave him a troubled smile and put her other hand on his knee, first glancing past him to make sure the door was latched.

"I locked it," he said.

"People will talk."

"People do," he said. "Someday you'll tell me what brought you to America, Abby Irene. My curiosity keeps me up nights."

She sipped her brandy. "I don't think it was curiosity, Richard. Not last night, anyway."

He offered her an expression of frank surprise. "Really? You didn't sleep well either?"

"No one did, it seems. And one boy's night-time wandering may have led to his death."

"Ah, yes. Tell me about the murder."

"There's little enough to tell." She let her hand slide across the tailored dark fabric of his trousers before leaning back, curling against the arm of the loveseat in a manner that would have horrified her tutors. "Don Sebastien has involved himself, but he is – as is his wont – playing his cards close to his chest. And whoever it was that arranged the vanishments and the murder isn't above a little rough play with a hunting rifle." Sebastien had dug the flattened bullet out of molded plaster. Now Garrett slipped it from the cuff of her glove and dropped it with a clink into Richard's brandy glass.

His lips thinned. "You were not harmed." Flatly, as if he would accept it no other way.

"Thanks to de Ulloa. I was not harmed." She swirled brandy on her tongue, watching Richard fish the bullet out between thick fingers and hold it up to the light. Her voice was more petulant than she had intended when she spoke again. "If I could find the rifle that came from, I might be able to prove who fired it. And I *wish* you would let me have that Peter Eliot assassinated."

"Abby Irene..."

"I know, my love. I'm not – *quite* – serious. Yet. But you know he'd rather have your nephew in your place."

"David is too young." The Duke raked a hand through his hair and bit his lip. "Which is why Peter would want him in my place. Of course, I'd have to be dead."

"Dead or abdicated." She did not permit longing to enter her voice.

"There is that. And there are days when the temptation to divorce is overwhelming. But then I think of Mayor Peter Eliot. And the French and Iroquois on our Western border. And," he continued bitterly, "King Phillip, and his Eastward-looking eye."

"I wouldn't have you anyway, Richard." Trying for levity.

He toasted her, one eyebrow raised, his voice rich with irony. "What sensible woman would marry a man she knows to be unfaithful?" Into her silence, he continued, "The murder."

She finished her brandy. "Grisly," she said, standing to pour herself another. "Inhuman, I think. Nasty."

"Ah." He frowned as she turned back.

She saw him taking in the disarray of her dress, and drew herself up a little prouder. *You were a famous beauty once, Abigail Irene. If you're stupid enough to sleep with your superior, you'd best be smart enough to use whatever you have left.* "Also, the murdered boy was slain on his own doorstep. Mud to your ankle, and not a footstep. No marks and no signs anywhere, except two windows open and his whole family missing."

The Duke leaned forward, all but ready to jump to his feet.

"Missing? How many?"

"Mother, father, adolescent sister, housekeeper. Strange."

"Indeed. Continue."

Garrett shrugged. "Most odd was the wax."

"Wax? Candle wax?"

"Droplets of it. Scattered throughout the house. Splashed. Near the boy's body as well."

"I see. And yet no leads?"

Garrett shook her head. "If I locate the candle – presuming it is a candle – I'll be able to use the principles of contagion, similarity and sympathy to prove that the wax originated with that particular one, and we'd have a case. But..."

"But?"

"Well...Richard, I have nothing. I haven't even a trail to follow, and four people are missing who may very well be alive and in danger somewhere."

Across the room, he nodded. "I see."

"Do you?"

No smile creased Richard's face now. "You say that Don Sebastien has taken an interest?"

Garrett nodded curtly.

"Use him," Richard said, coldly. "Use whatever it takes. I'm relying on you, Abby Irene."

"Richard," she answered softly. And: "My Lord."



Garrett seldom entertained at home, and when she did, they were usually the sort of guests one received in the den, or the library. Her laboratory was on the first floor of her townhouse, immediately behind the parlor, where one might have anticipated a dining room. The room itself was half study and half chemistry, with books and chairs lining the walls and long stone-topped benches running parallel.

Cleanly clothed, now, and gowned in a white canvas smock to protect her dress, Garrett moved crisply between her granite-topped workbench and the thaumaturgic circle inlaid in red and white stone tiles amid the slate-blue field of the floor. She laid out the samples she'd isolated from the body of the murdered boy: earth, fingernail clippings, scraps of his clothing and scrapings from the steps on which he had died. She piled each sample in a shallow watch glass placed in one of the isolation circles. Those smaller peripheral circles also held beakers of clotted blood and an Erlen flask of rainwater, along with samples of hair that she had retrieved from the toiletries of the missing individuals – a bit of everything she meant to eliminate from the parameters of her spell. At the very center of the circle, over the gas flame, a crucible warmed. A low table set beside it held a small heap of candles brought from the victims' house and several more watch glasses.

Three of these shallow dishes each contained a bit of the waxlike substance. The last one cradled splinters from the gouges in the blue wooden door.

By seven o'clock, Garrett was on her second pot of tea. Mike had come in to find her after his supper and was dozing in his basket. Straightening from her bench, she had just thought of pausing for her own meal before the evening's real work when a familiar tap on the door brought her head around. Mike pricked up his ears and hopped to his feet as she opened the door.

"Supper already, Mary?" Garrett asked the dark, narrow-shouldered housekeeper standing in the hallway.

Mary's eyes twinkled. "If it please you, m'Lady, there's a right handsome gentleman caller to see you. I've invited him in." Mary extended an ornate silver tray so that Garrett could pick up the visiting card lying on it.

"Ah. Indeed?" She didn't think she needed to glance at the name – the slightly oily feel of parchment between her fingertips told her everything. "Engraved. Very nice. Send Don Sebastien in, please. I will receive him in the laboratory." Mike wagged his coiled plume happily after Mary; she ducked her head and left.

Mary must have taken the gentleman detective's overcoat and hat, but Garrett noticed that the shoulders of his coat were damp through. "Is it raining again, Don Sebastien?" Absently, her hand

came up to press the place between her breasts where a sigil tattooed in crimson marked her training. She felt as if his gaze burrowed through cloth to notice it.

"Indeed," he said, bowing over her hand, making no comment on her stained smock. Again, his lips brushed the back of her fingers – ungloved, this time – and sent a shiver down her spine.

Her terrier withdrew to his basket and watched the tall stranger warily. She snapped her fingers for Mike's attention, and his tail flipped twice, but he merely lay there, watching with disturbing, alert eyes.

"Have you had any success, my dear Crown Investigator?"

She sighed and turned away, gesturing toward the circle. "As you can see, I am just about to commence. What have you discovered, Don Sebastien? As I recall, when we parted company, you were on your way to research the boy's family."

"And so I was. May I sit?"

"As it pleases you," she answered. He selected a wing backed chair against the wall, pushed away from Garrett's equipment and opposite Mike's basket, not far from the hearth.

When he was settled on the olive brocade and had refused tea, he began to speak. "The lad's name was Bruce Carlson, home on Easter break from a school in Westchester. His family, as you no doubt noticed from the house, were not without resources, which proved fortunate for them, because the lad seems to have been something of a troublemaker."

"Really?" Garrett turned up the flame under her crucible and began breaking the candles into it. "What sort of trouble?"

"Well." The handsome Spaniard rubbed his hands together, leaning toward the fire. "There were whisperings – nothing proven, you understand, or even openly charged – that he was less than honorable to a maidservant who left their employment last year."

"English girl?" *Even a servant should have been able to go to the Colonial Police if her master's son laid hands on her.*

"Irish," Don Sebastien answered, his frown raising him an inch or two in Garrett's estimation. Her own history gave her a certain sympathy to pariahs of any stripe – Irish, Negro, even the Romany and Indian halfbloods who were welcome nowhere – but few aristocrats harbored fellow-feeling for their 'inferiors'. "No family I've been able to locate. Not even a last name."

"What became of her?" *What is your agenda, Don Sebastien? What is it you want of me? Of New Amsterdam?*

He shrugged expressively, smoothing his damp hair behind his ear. "I do not know. I understand she may have been – *embarazada*, although such things are not openly spoken of."

"So we have a motive for the killing. A potential motive, at least. Sorcerous blood runs strong in those old Irish families."

Don Sebastien nodded. "There may be other motives as well. The father is a member of the Colonial Parliament, House of Commons."

Garrett stirred wax with a glass rod, the hot scent filling her head. "They must be better off even than the house shows."

"Not necessarily. The father – Robert Carlson – has familial links to Mayor Eliot. And the Mayor's patronage."

"Ah." The wax was clearing. Garrett fished the wicks out of the bottom of the crucible and trapped them against the rim, scorching her fingers slightly as she pinched them out. She blew on the scalds. "Would he not have been the target, then?"

"Perhaps. We cannot be certain he was not – he is, after all, gone.

And we also cannot rule out other, unknown, enemies."

Garrett lifted the first of the watch glasses and held it over the seething pot. "What troubles me is the consents," she said. "The boy was killed outside the door of his house. Outside its protection. But the family – although that upstairs window was open, there is no trace of forced entry."

"Continue, Crown Investigator." She thought she saw respect in his eyes. *Perhaps his open-mindedness about the worth of things extends to Irish and women both. Will wonders never cease?*

"Human agencies can come and go as they please. Magical ones – the forms must be observed. One of the forms is consent, expressed or implied."

"Ah, yes," he said. "I am familiar with the theory. And of the difference between implied and informed consent, and that one will serve as well as the other." He smiled as if something amused him. "So, in adherence to the principal tenets of magic, if no human agency entered the house – excepting the officers of the Colonial Police –"

She stirred the contents of the watch glass into the wax. "– then a consent must have been issued to whatever did. Did you note the damage to the door?"

"Si." He watched her intently now, eyebrows rising as she frowned at the contents of her crucible.

"That's odd."

"Crown Investigator?" He stood from the wing chair and would have come to her, but she raised one hand to forestall him before he crossed into the circle.

"A moment," Garrett said, selecting another glass. "As I was saying, whatever killed the boy – and I too become more convinced it was a whatever and not a whomever – made an attempt at the door and was barred from entrance. However, it – or something else – apparently managed to enter the house almost immediately and remove the residents tracelessly."

"Except..." His long fingers indicated the shallow dish in her right hand.

"Candle wax. Yes." She nodded and upended it.

Don Sebastien leaned forward, curiously, his boots firmly on the outside of the tiled circle. "What are you looking for?"

"Antipathy," she answered, and looked up long enough to shoot him a brief, real smile.

"What every woman wants."

Garrett laughed and set the dish aside, rather more casually also capsizing the third one into the vessel. She did not lift the one containing the splintered bits of door. "I've learned something interesting, Don Sebastien. You may enter the circle now, I'm finished. Come and see."

Mary served them dinner on a card table in the book-paneled library, where Garrett normally took her solitary meals. Silver candelabra decorated the table, and when Garrett commented on the extravagance, Mary remarked that she'd gotten a bargain on candles. Don Sebastien lifted his Windsor-backed chair and placed it adjoining Garrett's, rather than across. Amused or contemplative, she permitted the familiarity. He tasted his wine and picked up the heavy, long-tined silver fork gingerly, investigating the salmon on his plate.

As he teased the flaking fish apart, he glanced up and met her eyes, smiling. "You did not find what you expected," he said.

Garrett ate carefully but with good appetite. "One tries not to have expectations, precisely," she answered. "But yes, I would have to say that I did not expect the splashed wax to exhibit similarity with the candles remaining in the house. You saw how the wax in the crucible accepted what I introduced to it?"

Don Sebastien nodded. "I could see no difference."

"The principle of antipathy states that two substances which do not share an identity will not normally commingle. This tells me that the splashes of wax which we retrieved from the Carlsons' house are magically identified with the candles they were using."

"Those candles were from several sources, however. Beeswax and paraffin, you had." Don Sebastien laid his fork down by his plate. Rain drummed on the windows.

"But what is important in this case is that they were bought by the same person, with the same sense of purpose – that of lighting her home. The will of the individual who uses a thing is very important. A bullet and a gun, for example, are manufactured separately – but a bullet may be traced back to the gun from which it was fired, using the principle of sympathy – which is the converse of that of antipathy. Do you understand?" She peeled buttered bread apart with her fingers and offered a tidbit to the terrier, her expression challenging Don Sebastien to say anything as the little dog nipped her fingers with sharp white teeth.

He smiled, amused, swirling wine in his glass. "Very well, I think. So the splashed wax came from candles inside the home."

"Precisely. Which means..."

Sebastien effortlessly picked up her thread. Annoying or not, it was a pleasure to talk to a man with a wit. "...our lad must have gone out to the stoop to investigate something – some noise, some cry – and been carrying a candle in his hand."

"Then we are left with another question, Don Sebastien."

"Sí, DCI. What became of the candle?"

"At dinner, Don Sebastien, you may call me Abigail Irene if you so desire." She lifted her glass and drank deeply. "From the evidence of the wax, there was nothing special about it. I wonder if it was picked up by a bystander, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Don Sebastien, you've barely touched your dinner."

He shook his head slightly, smiling. "This is not what I am hungry for." And then he sighed and glanced toward the windows. Mike, curled watchful near the door, whined. "I wonder what this night will bring."

"Rain," Garrett said, and – weary to the bone – kissed him on the mouth.

Later, in the darkness of her bedroom, he paused with his cool face pillowed on her belly. "This is what I hunger for, Abigail Irene."

"A request for consent, Sebastien?"

He nodded against her skin.

"What harm will come to me of it?"

"A day's weakness. Or two. No more, I promise; I would not take from you the sun."

With some slight idea of what she offered, she smiled into the darkness and whispered, "Yes."

And screamed against her muffling fists as he turned his head and sank fangs like spikes of ice and flame into the inside of her thigh.



Sometime in the night, the rain stopped, and Sebastien slipped from beneath the covers to dress. Garrett stirred sleepily, the stiffness in a blackening bruise tightening her leg. "Stay until morning?"

"I cannot, my lady. The clouds are breaking... and I cannot risk the sunrise." Shirtsleeved, a pale ghost in the darkness, he bent over the bed to kiss her. She tasted the harsh metal of her own blood on his tongue. "I will return, if you will have me." He ducked his head and kissed the tattoo of a sorcerer, nestled just between her breasts.

"Ah," she said, one hand still on his arm. "I... cannot promise fidelity, Sebastien. Or any acknowledgment of this."

"Secrets," he answered, "are a stock in trade." He straightened away from her. Outside the door, Mike – silent for hours – scratched and yipped.

Garrett's hand rose to her throat. "I feel it." She fumbled for her wand and kindled a light. The stub of candle flared.

Don Sebastien moved toward the door, listening with an ear pressed to the wood. "Nothing," he said, and cracked the door open so that Mike could scramble in. The dog lunged across the floor, scattering throw rugs, and hurled himself into his mistress's arms to bathe her face with his little clean tongue.

Gathering him close, Garrett rose to her feet, her pistol ready in her other hand. Her dressing gown lay forgotten on the foot of the bed. "This is just like last night," she whispered.

Sebastien came to stand beside her. "Our quarry," he said. "I'd warrant it."

For a long moment, they stood side by side, listening to the nightfall. Nothing disturbed the spring chill of the bedroom. Garrett shivered and set her dog down. He whined, cuddling close.

"Don Sebastien," she said, suddenly formal in her nakedness. "Have you a way to track the source of that unnatural chill? A poltergeist, would you say?"

He shook his head. "Yes, and I do not."

She frowned. "Learn what you can of Robert Carlson. I will call on you before lunchtime. Unless you will be sleeping."

He smiled, and bent to kiss her on the cheek. "A woman both brave and fair," he said. "I never sleep." He raised an eyebrow at her, bowed, and was gone through the door and down the stairs.

Morning did indeed dawn bright and clear: Sebastien's instincts proved correct. Garrett, exhausted by a second sleepless night, did not trouble herself with the Mayor's office hours. Instead she presented herself at his home on Manhattan, fronting the park, before breakfast. Her groom offered her a conspiratorial wink as she disembarked. He knew very well how long Don Sebastien's carriage had waited.

And what would you say if you knew the Spaniard was an immortal drinker of human blood? It explained many things.

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There was always a contingent of Colonial Police by the Mayor's door, and Garrett nodded to one of them as she passed, recognizing the red haired youth. He blanched when she met his eye, and she fought a grin. *Wait until the rumors of your wampyr lover get around. Ah, to be a stranger to scandal...but what fun would there be in that?*

The Mayor greeted her in the echoing marble-pillared entryway, flanked by servants and the dark-haired young Master of Thaumaturgical Sciences. Now she saw him clad in a dressing gown, and clearly made out the sigil inked black under the notch of his collarbone.

Private sorcerer, not personal secretary. And the Mayor keeps him at his side at all times. Interesting. Can he truly be so frightened of Richard?

"Sir, you did not tell me," Garrett said, ignoring the pleasantries, "that one of the missing was your political ally."

"It did not seem significant," Peter Eliot answered. "And I would never use my office to the advantage of my friends, of course. Detective, will you join us for coffee?"

Garrett bit her tongue, contenting herself with a shake of the head. A moment later, when she'd brought herself back under control, she continued: "Are you taking precautions, sir, to prevent an attack upon your person?"

"I am," he answered, and she noticed the significant glance that passed between sorcerer and Mayor. "I will send messengers to the Duke, as well. Perhaps it is some plot of the French or Iroquois. I would not put raising demons past them."

"Raising demons?" Garrett snorted, smoothing her hair back. "Would that were all, your Lordship. Would that were all."

Halfway along the long route from the Mayor's house to the Duke's, the clamor of hooves racing too fast for a city street drew alongside her carriage. "DCI!" A city Guard, one of the Duke's men, resplendent in red on a lathered dark bay. "There's been another murder, Ma'am. The Duke is there."

"Tell my coachman to bring the horse around then," she said, leaning through the curtains. "Lead on, good man. Lead on!"

Thirty minutes later, the carriage clattered into an exclusive neighborhood not far from the Mayor's house. Her heart sank as she recognized the address – the townhome of William, Earl of New Haven, another Member of the Colonial Parliament. House of Lords, and one of Richard's closest allies.

Richard handed her down from the carriage, to all appearances formal and distant – but she felt the squeeze of his hand and caught the comforting smile in his eyes, even if his lips showed nothing. She felt obscurely guilty, and forced herself to return the smile. *You owe him nothing:* remembering the hard, slick texture of Sebastien's hair.

"The same as last time?"

Richard shook his head. Garrett wanted to smooth the tight creases from the corners of his eyes. Frustration curled her fingers. She forced herself to listen. "They're just – gone. The entire family. Seven staff. The groom and stableboy are present and unharmed, but everyone who slept in the house has vanished."

"More wax?"

"Spattered on the floor. Otherwise clean as a whip."

Garrett, dizzy with exhaustion, followed the Duke inside, thoughtful as he led her from room to room. "The groom called the Guard, which is why we are here and not the Colonial Police."

"Politics," Garrett said, too much a lady to spit. "But whoever is behind this doesn't seem to be choosing sides."

"What do you mean?"

"One of yours, one of the Mayor's. Were the windows open when

you arrived?"

"Two in the bedrooms only. And what you just said – not precisely true." Alone in the servant's stair, he laid a hand upon her shoulder. She turned to him, and they kissed furtively, a moment's embrace.

"Oh?" she asked, breathless. Her heart pressed, enormous, in her throat.

The Duke's eyes crinkled at the corners, but it wasn't exactly a smile. "Robert Carlson, the house of Commons fellow – he passed information to us, Abby Irene."

"Us?"

He nodded. "The Patriots. He was opposed to home rule. Not that Peter Eliot ever knew it."

"Ah," Garrett leaned against the wall for a moment, considering. "Or maybe he did."

Richard laid the palm of his hand against her cheek, breaking her train of thought. "Abby Irene..."

His tone rang alarms. She stiffened, did not answer. He continued. "A man was seen leaving your house late last night."

Garrett stepped back. "Don Sebastien de Ulloa," she replied. "What of it? I am not a married woman, and I am old enough to make my own decisions, Richard."

His lips twitched, his eyes dark with concealed pain. "You are beholden to no man," he said, very quietly.

Garrett laughed low in her throat, tired and giddy. "That's right, Richard. Not you. And not him either. Do you understand?"

He took a breath, let his hand fall to his side, and leaned forward slowly, touching his lips to the center of her forehead. "Perfectly," he said, and turned away.

"I have the maidservant's name," Sebastien said from the darkness of the parlor doorway. "Where were you this afternoon?"

Garrett dropped her velvet carpetbag inside the front door and leaned against the frame. Mary would not thank her for the clutter, but she was too exhausted to care. "I was with the Duke, and then at University. There have been more disappearances. Why are you here?" She was too exhausted for politeness, either. She stripped off gloves and cast them on a side table.

"You did not keep our date. I was concerned."

Mary bustled down the hallway to take Garrett's coat, clucking over the mess. The bruise on Garrett's thigh ached, and more than anything she wanted to be left alone. She wove unsteadily on her feet. "So you came to check on me when darkness fell. Thoughtful."

Sebastien ignored the dig. "We need to talk in private."

Garrett bit her lip and nodded acquiescence, leading him up the stairs. "I'd bet a guinea the Mayor's somehow behind this," she said. "He's got a sorcerer dancing attendance – black mark, not red, so he could have graduated from any little backwater college of magics and I have no way of knowing what his ethics are. Furthermore, I've learned that the man who vanished yesterday was working for the Duke on the sly."

"Interesting. Was there another dismemberment, or merely the disappearance?"

Mike ran at their heels, determined not to be left behind. Abruptly, Garrett stopped and crouched, offering her hand to the patchwork dog. "I'm sorry, boy. I should have said hello when I came in." He wriggled adoringly, and she tousled his head before she straightened. Don Sebastien caught her arm to keep her afoot. "Disappearances. A whole household again, which sent me to the library for the balance of the day. I can think of only one reason for attacking entire households."

"And what is that?" They attained the landing; Sebastien opened her chamber door. Mike gamboled past him, having decided that wampyr made acceptable houseguests after all.

"Fear," she said. "To engender fear."

"I keep asking myself," Sebastien commented, "what was different about the boy? Why did he need to die so terribly, when the others just...softly and silently, vanished away."

Garrett staggered again. "I need to lie down."

"Of course you do. A sleepless night, and the blood you gave to me...on top of the work of the past two days. Forgive me." He scooped her into his arms like a child – like a doll – and carried her to bed. Mary had made it, tidied the counterpane, placed a new candle on the bedside table to replace the one burned out the night before.

Blackness like an undertow, Garrett tried to remember the last thing. She yawned jawcrackingly. "Sebastien. You said..."

"Ah, yes," he answered. "The missing maidservant. I haven't found her yet, but I have her name. Forester. Maeve Forester."

Sleep sucking her under, Garrett knew to a certainty that there was something enormously important about that name, but she was damned if she could remember what it was.

A chill awakened her in the small hours of the morning.

Sebastien lay curled beside her, but his body offered no warmth, and her heart hammered in her chest as if she awakened from a nightmare. Mike whined by her feet, huddling into the covers.

"Sebastien?"

"I feel it," he said. "Like last night."

But it wasn't. Similar. But colder and stronger, and it froze her to the bone. The curtains on the casement windows fluttered – *odd*, she thought, *those should be tight shut*. And she could see that they were, see the glass reflecting the gaslights from the city below. *Where is the draft coming from?* Teeth chattering, Garrett reached for her wand and struck a light.

The temperature dropped sharply. Garrett clutched her wand to her chest. Mike growled his terrier's growl, voice of a much larger dog in a little dog's throat.

Meanwhile, Sebastien swung his long legs out of the fourposter and stood. When he spoke, even his cool breath frosted in the icy air. "Ghost?" he asked.

"Sebastien!"

Garrett threw herself across the bed, away from the nightstand, jumping up with her back against the far wall, the coverlet dimpling under her feet. Mike scrambled toward her, crowded her ankles growling, all sharp teeth and powderpuff defiance. Slowly, Sebastien turned...

The candle on the nightstand ascended into the air and was joined and circled by others that materialized out of the darkness. A vast, lumpy darkness, clawing with enormous hands like annealed black clots of wax, a ring of candles blazing on the gnarled stump that might have been its head.

Garrett screamed as the thing reached for her. She leveled her wand at it and spoke a word. A spark flashed between them, did nothing. Mike snarled and would have lunged after the threat, and Garrett swept her leg aside, knocking her indomitable companion from the bed. He yelped, and she flinched, but for a second he was safe from the squelching abomination that examined her face with familiar pale eyes.

It grabbed for her and she twisted away, falling half into the crevice between bed and wall. In a moment, those slick, sucking hands would touch her flesh. "Sebastien! The candles!"

Sebastien hesitated, hands half outreached as if to grab the monstrosity and haul it away. Candle wax dripped from its crown, spattering the tile floor; droplets that touched its black hide vanished without a trace.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't touch it! The candles! Put them out!"

Mike growled low in his throat as he found his feet again, eyes gleaming in the flickering brilliance. Something moved through the blackness, flaring light. Candle wax dripped, spattered, ran.

The thing lurched closer, stepping onto the bed. Sebastien glanced about wildly, caught up a rug from the floor, and swung just as Garrett, half-pinned, shouted a word of magic and hurled her wand like a throwing knife.

The rug came down on the dark thing's crown, dashing candles out. Garrett's wand vanished into its breast, silver tip first. The thing wailed, spinning wildly, reaching for Sebastien with groping, malformed paws. He skittered aside like a toreador, swinging the rug again, smashing the thing in the face. A final candle fluttered out as it fell forward, keening, clutching Sebastien's shirtfront, and Garrett saw the horror in his eyes as it started to enfold him in devouring blackness.

And then it sagged to its knees, slid downward, cloth tearing in the grasp of its suddenly human hands. It fell, curled inwards, and buried its face in its knees, dappled moonlight shaking in short red curls.

Duke Richard waited for her in her parlor, flanked by city Guards. The early afternoon light crept in through white eyelet lace, gilding his hair. He had his hat in his hand, as if he did not intend to linger, but Mike sat on his shoes, tongue lolling.

When she entered, he dismissed the Guards.

"Richard," she said, when the door was closed.

"Investigator Garrett."

She came a few steps closer, and did not let her hurt show in her face. "I'm glad to see you, your Highness."

His jaw worked, and the hat tumbled from his hands as he came to her, pulling her close, all but crushing her in his arms. "Abby Irene." His voice broke.

She leaned into the embrace for a long, quiet moment, listening to the pounding of his heart. When he finally let her step back, she did. "I'm safe."

"But barely. And I wasn't there to protect you."

"Sebastien was," she said, and regretted it immediately. "What's to become of Officer Forester?" He'd been taken away in chains before sunup.

"He's cooperated. Named his accomplice. Or his handler, more like – the Lord Mayor's pet sorcerer."

"Neither one implicated the Mayor?"

"Stayed silent as the grave. To hear Forester tell it, LaMarque – the sorcerer – offered him revenge against the lad who ruined Forester's sister. Forester took him up on it, not knowing the price. And then LaMarque – and Peter Eliot, of course, but neither one of them has or will admit that – used that consent, once granted, to enslave him. From what he said, he killed the Carlson family first, consumed them...and then chased the lad out into the street to deal with him more messily."

Garrett shuddered. "What about the splintered door?"

"Misdirection. A smart lad. He'll hang, of course."

"Of course." The door was shut; the curtains were drawn. She laid a hand on his shoulder, leaned her face against his sleeve.

"They must have thought I was close."

"You were." He put his arm around her shoulder. "I would have

been next, no doubt."

She nodded. *This is wrong. And yet...what else can we do?* "It is a pity that we cannot arrange a search of the Lord Mayor's domicile. I feel certain that we would find a rifle which I could match to the bullet fired at me."

He let the silence hang for a moment before he continued. "What I don't understand is how Forester got admittance to the houses. I know there are rules of consent and so forth, for these dark things to do their will." He looked away. *And he's not mentioning Sebastien, although it's costing him something not to.*

"Each of the houses invaded had apparently received a surprising bargain on candles recently. And an action can provide consent as easily as a word."

"I am afraid I'm not following you, Abby Irene."

Garrett counted breaths before she answered, pressing her face to his arm. "Consent must be offered," she said. "Express or implied. But think. You awaken, cold and alone. In darkness with a banked fire. You feel a presence looming over you. What is the first thing you do?"

"Reach for my pistol."

"After that."

"Strike a light. Oh!"

"Strike a light, yes. And reach for the candle by your bed."

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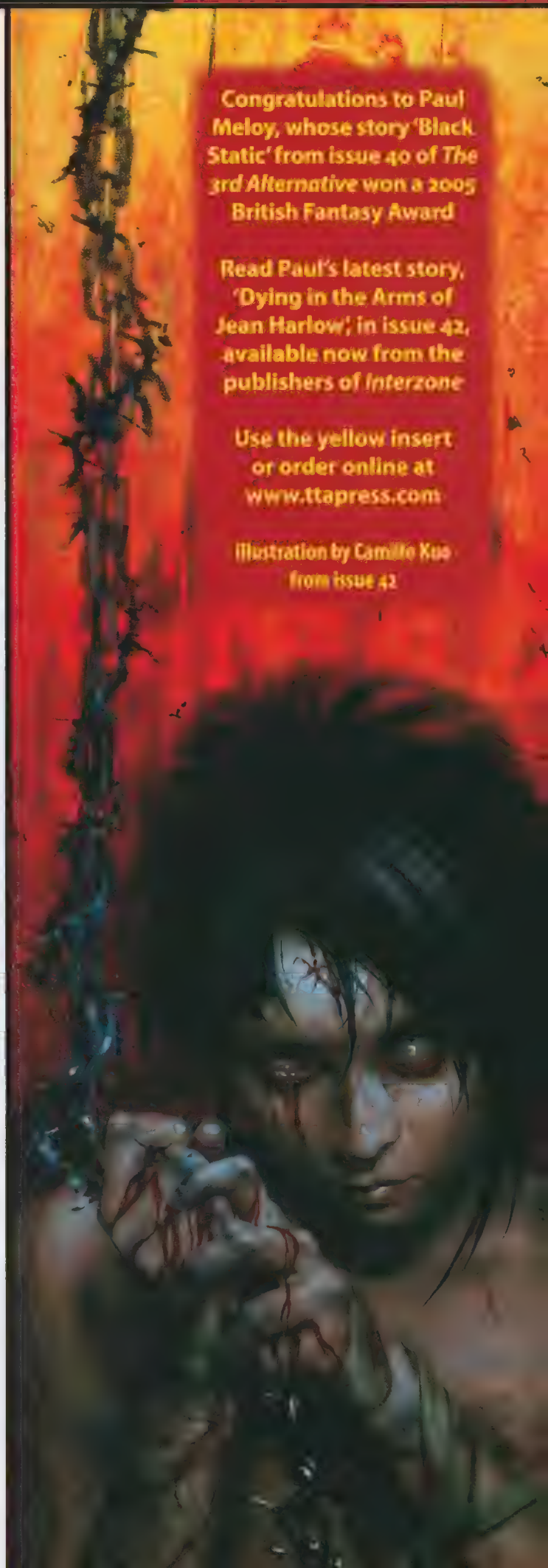
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Read Paul's latest story, 'Dying in the Arms of Jean Harlow', in issue 42, available now from the publishers of *Interzone*

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Illustration by Camille Kuo from issue 42



INTERLOCUTIONS

REVIEWS • FILMS • NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN

Expect the quadrennial surge in A&E admissions for genital contusions caused by falling jaws, as *Howl's Moving Castle* divides the world once more into those who believe God is merely Hayao Miyazaki's in-between and those who think *Spirited Away* was quite enough baroque girly anime to last them the rest of their natural lives. Hardly less momentous than a new Miyazaki feature is the long-awaited rollout in the coming months of the full Studio Ghibli back catalogue on English-language DVD, after years of Disney grudgingly dispensing single titles with an eyedropper at nigh-geological intervals. Here at Popcorn Towers, where we already keep our tissues in a miniature sofa with a reclining plush Totoro used by the daughters to host toy chatshows, we're pretty happy raccoons.

The sheer unlikeliness of *Howl's* collusion between the most certifiable national treasures of two hemispheres is tempered by two things. One, obviously, is Miyazaki's lifelong Europhilia, which has long been on view in both his literary influences and his sense of urban and rural landscape. But the other is Diana Wynne Jones' novel itself, which may be the one book in the entire western literary canon with a readymade Miyazaki plot: the indomitably resilient yet untransgressive heroine who heals the world by unsolicited kindnesses; the spellbound hero whose humanity is ebbing away from him; the teeming cast of exotic supporting characters who liberally turn out to be other characters under enchantments; and of course the fluid stream of mind-popping images and set pieces that stand somewhere between a plot and a dream. All that's missing is half-a-dozen more flying scenes and some fantasy sky-battleship action, and the film pretty much storyboards itself.

The magnificence of Miyazaki has always had three fundamental components, of which only his phenomenal storytelling intelligence and visual imagination tend to get the recognition they deserve – and many would feel, not entirely unfairly, that *Howl* is far from his best showcase for the former. Certainly recent Miyazaki has been visibly loosening its narrative stays a bit, and flirting increasingly with the outright barminess to which anime has always been partial. Western audiences weren't seriously fazed by this in *Princess Mononoke* and



Howl's Moving Castle divides the world into those who believe God is merely Hayao Miyazaki's in-between and those who think *Spirited Away* was quite enough baroque girly anime to last them the rest of their natural lives

Spirited Away, the breakthrough hits that finally marked his crossover into the Anglophone mainstream, because both were Japanese-set and steeped in wacky homegrown folklore whose exoticism was part of the magic. But *Howl* is his first big western cinema release to revert to the no less gorgeous fantasy-European settings of *Castle in the Sky* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*, with the result that the strange narrative slippages no longer have an alien cultural geography to excuse them.

Yet it's precisely this busting the bonds of conventional film plotting that's the main key to these films' extraordinary power. The deeper one dives into the Ghibli canon, the clearer it is that the heart of Miyazaki's magic is the wily old Trot's deep ideological resistance to the crude

infantilities of contemporary cinematic narrative, including those dominant in anime itself. The last Miyazaki film with a villain was *Castle in the Sky* in 1986, since which he's been ruthless in his eradication of all disambiguated evil from his oeuvre. Instead, the trademark Miyazaki plot model – already fully-formed in 1984's *Nausicaa* – sends a pure-hearted character to clean up a slough of embitterment and distrust, through sheer dogged determination to find the good. *Howl* is no exception, retiring and rehabilitating the novel's baddie mid-film and coopting a new composite character as a half-hearted, redeemable substitute.

One of the earliest payoffs from this stance was Miyazaki's emergence in the eighties as the world champion filmmaker for girls, with his occasional male leads

NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN

The Island: all the people who paid money to see Obi-Wan boning Rebecca out of Ghost World are left to wonder why they're having to sit through an hour of bloody Gattaca before the film even starts



consistently overshadowed by the heroine supports. In particular, *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Kiki*, and *Spirited Away* are without any halfway-close rival the three greatest girls' films of the modern era, and there's no better way of restoring your faith in the power of cinema than to watch the effect of any of these extraordinary films on a roomful of female teens-and-unders, most of whom you shockingly realise have never seen a film in their lives that doesn't insult, patronise, indoctrinate, and slow-poison their imaginations and aspirations with what the slimiest of Hollywood stink-gods deem they ought to want. Once you see it done, it's so obvious, so easy, that there seems no non-sinister explanation for the rest of the world's insistence on increasing the supply of Anne Hathaway and Lindsay Lohan films. And in *Howl*, Miyazaki has homed straight in on the thing that makes the book uniquely brilliant and dangerous as a source for film. It's daring enough that the teenage heroine spends the entire story in the body of a ninety-year-old woman. But the radical thing is that she doesn't mind; makes everyone, us included, fall arse-over in love with her; and never even fully changes back. It's hard to get your breath back at how utterly anti-Hollywood this is: the first film in memory to treat old age as no obstacle to normal filmic engagement and empathy by the young.

Of course, one of the fascinations of Miyazaki's first direct adaptation of a western text is the chance to see clearly at last how he operates on source material, particularly with a patient as lively on the slab as the DWJ book. Completely unfazed by the novel's freewheeling plot logic, he's remoulded the story around character arcs, set pieces, and images rather than details of sequence and motive, and freely unpicked and rewoven the strands of plot with a deft sense of where the nodes of brilliance are to be found. Some of the novel's more leaden deposits actually get

turned into gold in the process, as strikingly with the catch-a-falling-star whimsy (which Miyazaki massages into real magic by keeping the key image and ruthlessly jettisoning the rest of the poem). If the result still seems to clomp rather randomly around its countryside, it's no nuttier than the book, which stands as a proud reminder that seemingly stream-of-consciousness plotting has a long and vibrant tradition in British fantasy, and that Japanese readers probably find *The Magical Faraway Tree* every bit as bonkers as we find *Pom Poko*. Even Miyazaki seems to have balked at the castle door setting that leads to Wales – a setting already used up in *Castle in the Sky*, itself four years before DWJ's weirdly parallel *Howl* sequel *Castle in the Air*.

The English dialogue and dub is a little less confident than its predecessors' high standard, and there's clearly been some nervousness about the voicecasting of *Howl*. Having gone to the trouble of signing up Hollywood's most eligible Welshman, the English version insists on Christian Bale using his American accent and very very deep Batman voice – presumably because Miyazaki's *Howl*, like all the male characters, looks so rampantly gay on screen that only the manliest of hero voices will allow it to pass under the Disney banner. But in every other way, this is right up there with his best: so crammed with ideas it feels the screen is going to pop if your eyeballs don't go first, and so warm and wise that your heart may beat them both to it. Miyazaki's been talking of retirement for a good decade now, and the obituaries for 2D animation have been in galley for nearly as long. Last year's *The Cat Returns*, intended as a coming-out ball for the new generation of Ghibli talent, was frankly poor stuff, and not a patch on the Miyazaki-storyboarded fantasy sequences in *Whisper of the Heart* to which it was conceived as a sequel. Each last film in this amazing late-career surge by the master is a treasure beyond price. We shan't see their like again.

It's weird to think that the one American writer-director making films for kids with the same kind of flair, joy, and nuttiness is now that unreconstructed exploitation wizard and Latino Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez – whose entire *Spy Kids* trilogy has come and gone in the time between Miyazaki's last two films, and that's before we even approach *Sin City*. The latest 'Rodriguez Family Movie,' **The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D**, isn't really in a class with the first two *Spy Kids*, and flew rather over (sometimes under) the heads of the kids at the screening I saw. It's partly just that, with the *Spy Kids* kids now grown up into other genres, *Shark Boy and Lava Girl* has had to round up a new team of young stars. (There's something deeply unsettling about the fact that both Shark Boy and Lava Girl are played by kids whose first name is Taylor.) And though everyone's professional enough, the new kids don't have the comic spark of the wonderful *Spy Kids* duo; while UK viewers find it hard to see the faces for the vast expanses of dazzling teeth, which is only intensified by the washed-out 3D palette. Lava Girl is especially scary, with a smile that seems at least three times as wide as her head.

What's still 75% great about the film is two things. The first is that Rodriguez remains the best greenscreen director on earth. His standard technique, honed in the *Spy Kids* cycle, has been a kind of George Lucas on dexedrine: to shoot the live actors fast and then make the rest of the film up at his leisure in post-production. And even without the 3D razzle-dazzle (which has moved on significantly from the already fairly eyepopping *Spy Kids* 3D) the fantasyscapes and set pieces are consistently stunning. The second asset is the genuinely inspired Phantom Tollbooth-style quest, which involves a journey down the Passage of Time, the Train of Thought, the Stream of Consciousness, and so on – all stunningly visualised, with an action set piece apiece. The film's problems, which are all too apparent if you cruelly juxtapose it with Miyazaki, lie less in the thinness of characters and mythos (credited to Rodriguez *films*, whose inability to come up with much in the way of backstory for Lava Girl has to become a rather awkward plot point in itself) than in the platitudinous wittering on about the value of dreams. A less hyphenate filmmaker than Rodriguez might have had someone to tell him to fix lines like "When we make our dreams reality, reality becomes a dream." But the deepest dreamers need a lot of shaking to wake up.



The new Robert Rodriguez is fellow Texan Shane Carruth, whose remarkable if nine parts baffling time-paradox drama *Primer* not only claims the same improbable budget (\$7000) as Rodriguez' 1992 debut *El Mariachi*, but challenges the master himself in the number of cowboy hats worn by the writer-director-producer-cinematographer-editor-composer (and also star). But the result is a bravura demonstration of how to make a gripping, intellectually challenging hard-SF film with no discernible budget whatever. Unlike *El Mariachi*, where the seven grand was clever creative-accounting hype, *Primer* really does look like a film made by the director and his mates in their sheds, and derives its power entirely from the nifty ways it makes a virtue of this in the storytelling. The dialogue and performances are extreme *verité*, the tone set by a opening with four geeks yabbering at one another in quadruphonics across a cramped kitchen table; the plotting is elliptical to the point where a first viewing can only give a general sense of the kind of thing that must somehow have happened; and the drama, which at times is terrifically intense, comes almost entirely from the protracted sense that something unimaginably dreadful is either about to happen or more likely already has, but never quite being allowed to see what it is.

Primer's boldest achievement is that it's essentially a piece of post-cinematic cinema: a film that nobody stands a chance of fathoming on cinema viewings alone, and which can only really begin to make sense on DVD. In the US, a commented disc has been out since the spring, and the curious now have an abundance of plot-untangling fan pages online (some with gloriously baroque diagrams) to help make sense of the final half-hour, where huge chunks of essential story have been casually teleported into other times and erased. Recognising that ways of consuming and understanding film have irreversibly changed, *Primer* makes reviewing and fan discussion part of the basic process of understanding. In the end, obviously, it's for viewers to decide whether it warrants the effort to decode it; it's a bit of a shock the first time through

when the film suddenly stops after an hour and a quarter and you realise that the revelations you're anticipating have already been dispensed. But it's exhilarating just to wrap your head around a film that has more plot in its missing scenes than most films have in their running time.

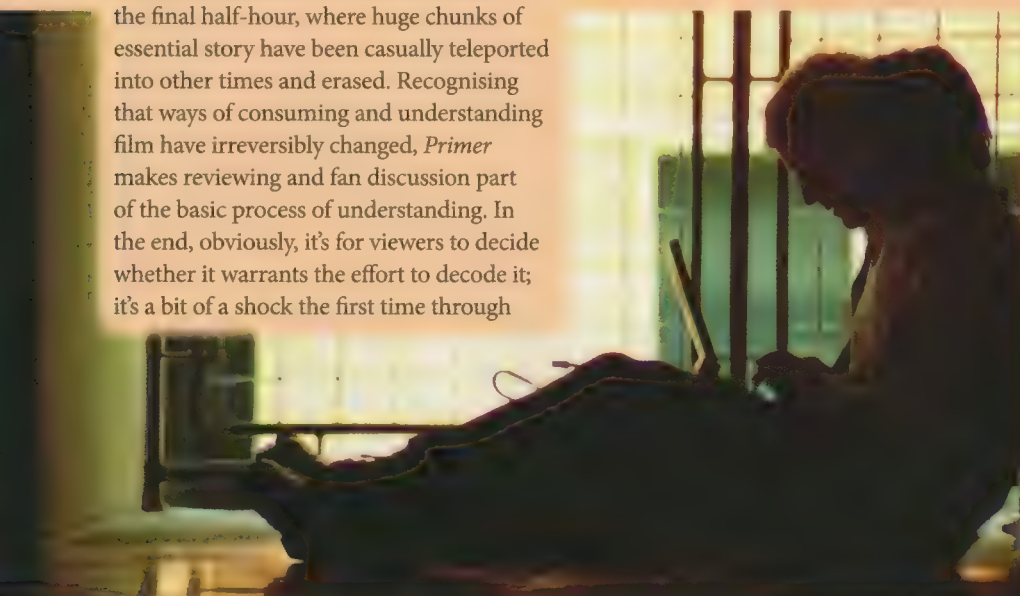
In a season of such wildly original auteur-driven treasures, it's easy to get misty-eyed over really big, crass, expensive studio movies where whopping great stars used to frisk around being beautiful and dodging explosions. Fortunately, those nostalgic for the dumber summer movie will always have *The Island*. The egregious Michael Bay's first SF film since *Armageddon* has lots of things going for it: great production design, by *Troy's* Nigel Phelps; another of Bay's trademark strong, set-piece-driven middle acts; and of course the blockbuster debut of Scarlett Johansson, the girl with the world at her feet. Above all, it has a truly inspired central conceit: two characters from a sterile narrative environment doing a Logan's re-run in a Michael Bay movie, the rules of which are obvious to everyone but them. Too inexperienced to plot their way out of the string of dumber-movie situations they find themselves in, our virgin simpletons don't even realise that they're living in the bodies of Ewan and Scarlett – the latter in a memorably bust-enhancing tracksuit – leaving them to marvel at the irrational responses of those around them. (When they finally work out what their body parts are for: "That tongue thing is amazing!" "I know! Open your mouth again!" "How come we never did this before?")

Most of it's just daft, with a benchmark Sean Bean villain barking lines like "I am

ordering you to contain the situation!" and "I have discovered the holy grail of science!" But where *The Island* comes culpably unstuck is in its aspirations, which would be laughable if they weren't so ghastly, to be a thoughtful SF movie about the ethics of human cloning in a system of private medicine. Part of the problem is merely structural: evidently designed as a conceptual-breakthrough narrative, the film has had to undergo the indignity of seeing its key revelation dumped into the pre-release publicity, out of what turned out to be well-founded nervousness about its commercial appeal. This leaves an hour of get-on-with-it before the characters catch up to where the audience has been all along, and all the people who paid money to see Obi-Wan boning Rebecca out of *Ghost World* are left to wonder why they're having to sit through an hour of bloody *Gattaca* before the film even starts.

But far more disturbing is the reduction of such genuinely important, genuinely complex issues as the ethics of human cloning to a persistent vegetative state of ethically monochrome Hollywood brainlessness, according to which the sanctioning of cloning for medical purposes will lead inexorably to industrial-scale people-farming, mass executions by gratuitously painful lethal injection, and everyone-into-the-incinerator climaxes. "They're simply tools," flannels mad Dr Bean. "They have no souls." Right-to-lifers will be whooping at this full-on equation of stem-cell research with the holocaust; but anyone else is left with a numb sense that, even by Hollywood standards, a fateful line of irresponsibility has been crossed. The tell-tale credits to a string of sacked writers suggest that the original donor DNA from which the project was cultured may have been noble and intelligent. But what's been released into the environment is a moronic, degenerate specimen of what Dr Sean calls "product," and Ms Scarlett more snappily calls "vegetating jelly trash." If you came across that in a Japanese supermarket, it'd be well worth shelling out for; not here. ■

Primer's boldest achievement is that it's essentially a piece of post-cinematic cinema: a film that nobody stands a chance of fathoming on cinema viewings alone, and which can only really begin to make sense on DVD



Fantasy & Science Fiction Vol 109, No 2 Digest, 162pp, \$3.99 or \$44.89 (\$54.89 outside the US) for eleven issues (one double). www.fsfmag.com

There are two novelettes and six short stories, my favourite being 'Refried Clichés: A Five-Course Meal' by Mike Shultz – an unfamiliar author to your reviewer, here serving up a juicily witty set of vignettes... not to mention an admonitory wag of the finger to any new young writer who is hoping to climb aboard the ship without a lifejacket.

There are comments on books by Charles de Lint, a film column by Lucius Shepard, and an excellent dissection of John Crowley by Elizabeth Hand. This is one of the American Big Name magazines. Accordingly, it would be nice if the scruffy quality of the paper could be improved; but this is no more than an antish quibble. The content is solid.

Farthing Issue 1

A5, 72pp, £2.50 or £10 for four issues or £500 for a lifetime ('a subscription which lasts for your lifetime or the lifetime of the magazine, whichever is the shorter'). www.farthingmagazine.com

Aside from the magazine reviewed directly below, this is the only publication reviewed herein which deals solely with fiction. There are nine stories, but that includes a final half-pager, 'I Love Cheese' by Paul Renault, a story that I'm struggling to see qualifies as SF, Fantasy or Horror (the genres listed on the cover, which comes with an excellent photograph by Glyn Davies), and three 'drabbles'.

You don't know what a drabble is? In essence they are mini-stories at the length of one hundred words a piece. I liked them a lot. (There is probably a good reason why they are called drabbles.) They are gut-shot stories; tales that mug the reader and leave in a hurry. I would much rather read these than see a similar amount of space used on advertising. See below.

As an inaugural issue this is incredibly promising. I loved the disaster road-trip narrative of 'A Bump in the Road' by Kevin Anderson, and I thought the mixture of the wispy and the solid most convincing. Sheila Crosby's 'Scream Quietly' (my favourite title) was a beautifully observed, and chilling, examination of domestic abuse...which led me to think that among all of the magazines in this column, *Farthing* (this issue) is probably the least 'genre'. It is,

and I'm impressed, peripheral fiction; and it's been published. There is, I would hope, a market for such material, after all.

Thumbs up for good luck.

Nemonymous Issue 5

A5 landscape, 80pp, published annually, various pricing options available. www.nemonymous.com

By now it is probably redundant to repeat the underlying *raison d'être* of D.F. Lewis's *Nemonymous* project. However, just in case...*Nemonymous* is a magazine which publishes stories but does not publish the authors' names. The names are printed (if the authors wish even this) in the following issue.

It has always been visually impressive. This particular edition has been designed, in red, to resemble an old-fashioned Memo Book...although that was not what I thought when I first saw the publication. The reason that I know that it is meant to resemble a Memo book is that I've read it, here, there and everywhere. My particular problem is that I have no idea what a Memo Book is so the joke is lost on me. That said...

As bristly as it has ever been, the fiction here is of a consistently entertaining standard. Even if you don't like every story (I had my doubts about one or two), you can watch from afar – and squint – and feel your mind into the way that the editor has included them for their artistic merit and their fit among the other children.

From the brilliantly witty 'The Robot & The Octopus' by muffle to the twelfth and final story, 'Grandma's Two Watches', by mumble, this is, indeed, as the editor states from the beginning, 'a megazanthus for parthenogenetic fiction and late-labelling' – not to mention a first class collection. It gets off to a hilarious start with 'The Robot...' (even though it contains the glaring error of a character smoking a cigarette that she has extinguished a few paragraphs before), and moves through a psycho-circus narrative called 'Running Away to Join the Town' and the sheer brilliance of waffle's 'Huntin' Season' (you can't beat a good bit of hunting and horror) – through to 'Soul Stains', which reminded me, unexpectedly, of Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*.

At first I thought that this was going to be *Nemonymous*'s comedy/comedic issue, on the back of a horror issue, a sexy issue...but I was wrong. It is, I might argue, the most thematically diverse since Issue 1

This is the first in an occasional series of reviews of magazines received. Or at least, that's the idea. These are early days in our editorship of *Interzone* and we will of course listen to any feedback. Put baldly, if this feature proves popular it will continue. If it doesn't, I will pick up the stake and stab it through its bleeding heart personally. This column refers to every publication received up to and including 3 September 2005, and given the print space available can only be a snapshot of each. • David Mathew

and, as is the way with this publication, I am looking forward to the revelation of the authors' identities in due course.

Postscripts Issue 4

A5, 144pp, £6/\$10 or £26 (£30/\$50 outside the UK) for four issues. www.pspublishing.co.uk

There are seven stories from names that collectively are more familiar than the gangs in the other magazines here reviewed: Alastair Reynolds, Eric Brown, Lawrence Person, Barry Malzberg and Paul DiFilippo, Adam Roberts, Jack Dann and Zoran Zivkovic. Although the best story was one that took me by surprise – 'Dharma Bums' by Jack Dann, which looks at and fictionalises certain elements of the lives of Kerouac, James Dean and Burroughs, in the sub-genre of fiction that I honestly believed I'd fallen out of love with a long, long time ago – it is the long piece of non-fiction that impresses me most.

It is an interview with Richard S. Prather, mostly known as a crime and detective writer, who became a full-time writer in 1949 – conducted by Graham Andrews. I love interviews like this: interviews which teach me from scratch about an author who has a distinctive interview voice (far from being the same thing as fiction voice) and makes me want to find out more about the same person.

Premonitions 2004 Edition

A4, 60pp, £4.50 (£9.50/\$13 outside the UK) per issue. www.pigasuspress.co.uk

This was a new one on me, and I wish it all the best. Nicely and simply produced, it is a mixture of fiction, poetry and art. I am not aware of many magazines that publish SF poetry, and although I am not

MAGAZINE ROUND-UP

really qualified to discuss SF poetry (on the grounds that I am never sure that I understand the point of it), I do respect the stance that the editor, Tony Lee, is taking. The Contents page lists a staggering 34 entries, many of them not more than a page long. Still...I might not know much about poetry but do know about SF poetry-writers' reputations; and I have certainly heard of Cathy Buburuz and Steve Sneyd, both of whom are featured herein.

The fiction, for me, was highlighted by the excellently-titled and beautifully-delivered 'Shotgun Al's Last Picnic' by Hugh Cook and 'Sex and the Single Xanthrocite' by Antony Mann. As the author himself is aware, I happen to think that Mann's earlier story, 'Shopping' (*Crimewave 4: Mood Indigo*), is one of the best short stories I've ever read – a tale of terror in a daily shopping list – and while 'Xanthrocite' might not be as good as that, it's still a good one and more than worthy of mention.

Overall, *Premonitions* is a class act: clean, uncluttered and with a content well chosen by the editor.

Whispers of Wickedness Vol 11 No 6

Fullsize, 90pp, \$3.99 or \$16.95 (\$21.95 outside the US) for six issues. www.rofmagazine.com

This is an extremely busy issue – seven stories, all illustrated, but with a higher ratio of non-fiction to fiction than in many magazines, including an art exhibition – and it has been extremely professionally produced. For my personal taste it is rather 'loud' in terms of appearance. While I fully understand the need for advertising, I felt rather bombarded by full-page colour ads (although amused by the variation of themes of the same: I can't remember when I last saw an advert for a firm that specialises in the design of swords and medieval weaponry).

What with the extensive movie reviews, book reviews and an interesting article on mythology by Heinz Insu Fenkl, it is page 34 before we reach our first story, 'The

Penultimate Riddle' by Richard Parks, a story that hinges on the fact that sphinxes are really 'sociable beings at heart'. The stand-out story for me is 'The Secret of Broken Tickers' by Joe Murphy, a tale which I found very refreshing among twists on more familiar fantasy tropes of dragons and dreams. Nothing wrong with dragons and dreams, of course; but I welcomed the variety of Murphy's story, and its artwork, by Eric Dinyer, is simply stunning.

On the subject of artwork, I feel it is my duty to offer a sombre warning. Those readers of *Interzone* who needed hospital treatment at the sight of our cover for Issue 199 due to apoplexy, internal injuries caused by laughter, or quadruple humour bypasses should know that this issue of *Realms of Fantasy* offers a pretty woman on the cover. With a weapon.

Whispers of Wickedness Issue 10

A5, 28pp (the reference in the editorial to the magazine's growth to 44 pages is baffling), currently free but from next issue £3 or £10 for four issues. www.ookami.co.uk

This is the last chance you have to get a free copy of *Whispers of Wickedness*: 'we're going upmarket; the print-zine will be perfect bound and increase in size to 60 pages. There'll be the same mix of fiction and non-fiction, poetry and art as now, just more or it and better presented.' Well, the slightly self-accusatory assessment is probably fair: this issue is, and looks like, a small press publication. Production values are kept very simple (and quite frankly the artwork didn't do much for me), but I liked the subtlety – quite often rare in small press horror – of the fiction...Poetry, as I've said before, I'm reluctant to say much about; but I liked the breathless quality of 'She Came in the Night' by Stephen Lee Cummings, although I thought at first that I'd hate it for its single-sentence paragraphs. It resulted in a good twist.

Especially useful was the centrefold spread of news (on pink paper) from the



world of the small press. The cheek of Terry Gates-Grimwood's assertion that every single story – 'whether Mills and Boon romance-fests or Tom Clancy mind-numbers, whether the horribly named "chick lit" or beautifully crafted works of literature' – are Horror stories made me smile; and if I wasn't aware of every name in the round-up, I enjoyed no less knowing what that person was up to in the field.

For the relaunch, however, could you do me a favour? Text looks horrible if you don't indent each new paragraph. For my sake? Please?

Barring rabid disapproval, I'll see you next time. ■

David Mathew

INTERLOCUTIONS

REVIEWS • BOOKS • JOHN CLUTE'S SCORES

Cultural Breaks

Brian W. Aldiss • Tachyon Publications, 237pp, \$24.95

Jocasta: Wife and Mother

Brian W. Aldiss • The Rose Press, 311pp, £24.95



Sanity and the Lady

Brian W. Aldiss • PS Publishing, 218pp, £54/£25

It is an amnesia of those who are young to forget that every day that passes is one day less. It is also an amnesia of the old. For a number of reasons, some of which are pretty obvious, it is probably just as well that this is so, that we don't choke on our lines because we remember the outcome. We don't want the plethoric but lovable young – those under 50 or so – going waesuck waesuck about the mortal coil daily tightening, or who will there be to weep for love or what? Nor do we want all the old men and women glaring at us with hasty eyes, telling us they know already already already, like William Butler Yeats, attention fixed on that girl standing there; or Wells cursing the damned fools; or Bertrand Russell cursing the damned fools; or Naomi Mitchison saying Dearie you have not done well enough, I kind of think; or Picasso pumping Priapus into his 90s; or John Le Carre angrier and angrier with each new book and more right; or

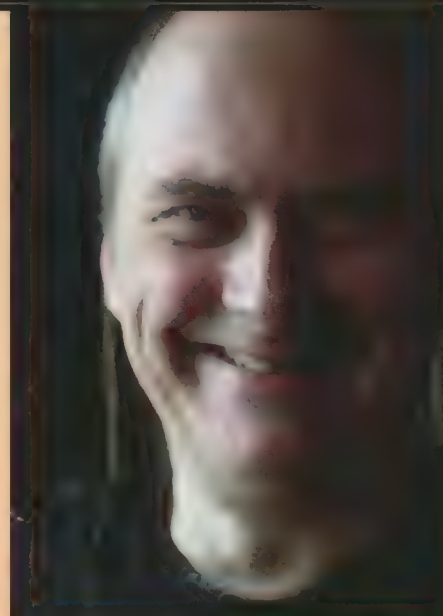
Brian W. Aldiss (80 this year), attention fixed to skin and flesh and bones and shit and spew and song, cursing the damned fools too. We do not really want too much reality. Pull the shades. But not yet.

There are three books here. The stories in **Cultural Breaks** variously adumbrate the pattern of the two novels: exemplary models of the human animal (dictators, generals) conduct debates inside their skulls (or not) about how to be human, how to see, how to escape, how to win: "In our wake," says Captain Hungaman (in 'Aboard the *Beatitude*' from 2004) of a great starship pursuing a criminal galaxy whose citizens have offended the human race, and devouring civilized planets in its way for fuel,

"we have destroyed a hundred so-called civilizations. They died, those civilizations, to power our passage, to drive us ever onward. We shall not be defeated. No, I don't regret a damned thing. We are what humanity is made of." Oratory had hold of him. "This very ship, this worldlet, is – what was the term in use in the old Christian Era? – yes, it's a *cathedral* to the human spirit."

He is speaking to aliens who occupy his head, inside and out. They think part of the problem with the race may be sex.

The two novels, though they differ substantially in subject matter and register, are structural mirrors of one another, and both end in nearly identical boneyards of futurity. With vaudeville ferocity, **Jocasta: 'Wife and Mother'** retells Sophocles from the point of view of the woman whom (Aldiss suggests in an afterward) the playwright had to ignore lest his astonishing artifact, the first and greatest of all *Appointment in Samarra* tales, unravel at its heart. *Sanity and the Lady* describes, from the increasingly uncorseted point of view of an implicated female victim/partner, the accidental near-future invasion of Earth by virus-sized aliens from the Coal Sack nebula, who have the power of gods and who come to inhabit our brains, from which coigns of vantage they ask leading questions. Both novels are about humans gaining consciousness through a wrench in perspective. They are the same story.



Attention Fix

I don't think Aldiss makes much use of Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) in *Jocasta* – though Jaynes was also on about the creation of consciousness through a transformation of the 'external' sights and voices of gods and ghosts into the internal raree-show of conscious introspection, he is much more melodramatic (and loony) than Aldiss, arguing that his highly potent metaphor of human evolution (hence the use of Jaynes by so many SF writers) is a *literal* description of what happened (hence his dismissal by 'serious' thinkers). In any case, Jaynes places the moment of transition exactly between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: Achilles talks to the gods; Odysseus talks to himself. Aldiss's moment of evolving consciousness comes rather later in the Matter of Greece, via Jocasta's turmoil as she wrestles with the fact that she somehow knew Oedipus was her son as soon as she saw and smelled him; with her knowledge that what the gods and oracles have been telling her may be no more (or less) than what her dreams remind her of. But *Jocasta* does not simply euhemerize the voices of the gods into gut gas from too much ripe wine; there is throughout the novel a genuine equipoise between supernatural and explained readings of what goes on in Jocasta's head.

JOHN CLUTE'S SCORES

In any case, early in the novel the ghost of the historical Sophocles is evoked to tell her that she is a figure in a Book, but that she hardly counts in *Oedipus Rex* (which he'll be writing a few hundred years later) because it would have been too risky to ask audiences to believe not only in Oedipus's iron-lunged unawareness, but also to credit her with the same refusal to see. He soon disappears, but Jocasta's subsequent fear that she and Oedipus "were mere figures in a drama, set to act out various roles consigned to them by the gods" neatly encapsulates the hoveringness of Aldiss's earthy airy pungent aethereal text. *Jocasta* is far too full of stares into orifices and penises and castrations and stench and allures and spring water to read anything like an old man's (Sophocles's, Aldiss's) denatured rumination on the nature of art and consciousness. But it is too full of the slang of the future to seem anything like fixed in time or place. In the end, *Jocasta* is an attempt at being all things. The shit is booked; the vellum is skin. The words are words; the Word is Gas.

In *Jocasta*, we know what's going to happen; and it does. Great stories are hard to break out of, even by a raunchy guilt-driven woman who'd been excluded from the original telling because she knew too much. But there is an aftermath to the novel, and it is here we are let off the hook, a little. Because (I think) Aldiss is treating the Oedipus/Jocasta story as *in itself* constitutive of human consciousness, its central characters are therefore accessible to the engendering minds of later figures, real or imagined, 'real' or 'imagined'. Oedipus/Jocasta are part of the long haul of how we think today – therefore we can think them, they are us, we are in the story of us they tell. This is what happens in the epilogue, where the novel as a whole turns out to be part of the dream of the race. *Sanity and the Lady* also has an epilogue, but in this case it shuts the door on the tale that comes before it; it does not say We are You, it says goodbye.

The tale itself is mostly told with that effect of dithery skittishness English writers are prone to whenever they describe English families with money and a big house and unmarried relatives under the eaves and Pinteresque servants, and...and...; but the English know what I mean without my saying it (and probably think it's a bit infra dig to bring it up), and nobody else – it is like the case of Dorothy Parker's porcupine – *nobody else wants to*. (It is the kind of tale that writers of SF from Richard Cowper to Doris Lessing to Gwyneth Jones have succumbed to – if you can't tell who the six aunts in the story are aunts of, you're in one; if characters are introduced by their nicknames, you're in one; if the author sounds like a new butler trying to remember the name of the oldest granny, you're in one.) *Sanity and the Lady* is a book of this sort, for parts, like one of Aldiss's Squire Quartet tales repeated as farce; but it does not take too long for the reader to get some sense that this particular Heartbreak House is full of actors who can't quite remember their lines (rather like the Rex Family of Thebes) as the world threatens to become America around them.

It is really very strange, like one of those great haunted double camera movements (is it Kurosawa who invented it?) where the camera moves physically backward on its dolly while simultaneously the focus moves towards close-up (or is it the other way round?), with the effect that you are closer to but farther away at the same time; that you are privy to the very pore in the skin of life but to its terminus as well, at the same time; that what is seen matters only for itself but only for what it means, at one and the same time. It is a style in literature – or at any rate in a late novel by Aldiss – that seems to come with old age. It is a style which hustles duality. It is very difficult to pin down, maybe because fixing the world in place is exactly what an old man impatient against the dark does not wish to accomplish: because fixing the world in place and dying are too alike for comfort. Here is one mild-mannered passage, not a

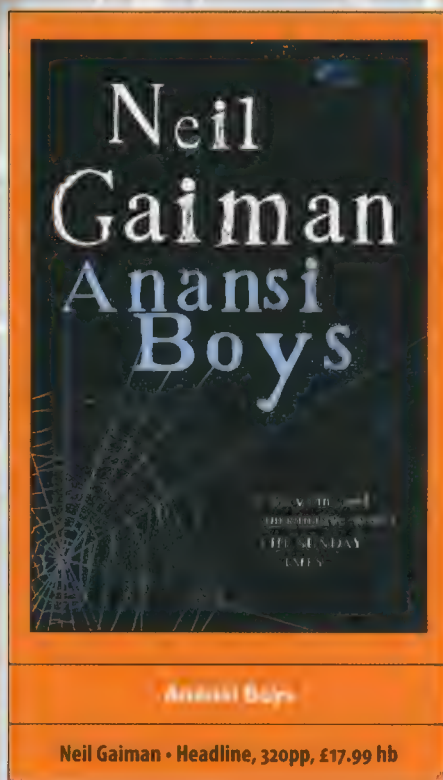
very remarkable one:

The face that was turned towards her was streaked with tears. Although it looked old and haggard, it was certainly the psychotherapist, Madge Stackberg's face, marked not only by the moisture of her grief but by her own and other's experiences through time.

The effortless shift from subjective point of view to omniscience, the petard-sharp homiletic contained in the last seven words, the subcutaneous edgy movement of the whole quiet passage towards a vantage that encompasses all – everything here is saying farewell. Farewell but not yet.

The virus/programme/continuity-of-universe-monitor has infested a Heartbreak House in southern England; its siblings have also landed in France, Canada, and the USA. The plot is double: on the surface of the telling, we follow Laura as she falls deeper into a quasi-marital conversation with something she cannot always (any more than Jocasta could) distinguish the register of: it is voice of god outside, it is the voice of Laura learning her life from within. The story of this marriage (and of her relationships with other members of her species) is fun, congested, scatty, tedious like all English novels of this sort, impatient. It is a good, deceptive read. The second story is hardly told at all. It is the story of how post 9/11 America takes over the world. The two stories – just like the double-camera-movement turns of their intimate telling – slide inside one another slickly, sickeningly. All the same, despite moments of queasiness, we are fooled (I certainly was) into thinking *Sanity and the Lady* is a comedy.

It is not. In the end, *Sanity and the Lady* is a genuine outpouring of old age. Which is to say it is the kind of book we should all hope to earn. Which is to say it is the kind of book whose fury makes us hope to live long enough to be able to say something similar. To say, I love you all. To say, Damn you all. ■



In *American Gods*, Mr Anansi scuttled around the edges of the reader's vision, contributing stories to the overall narrative. In *Anansi Boys*, his son, Fat Charlie takes centre stage, though he would really rather it was somebody else who took the limelight.

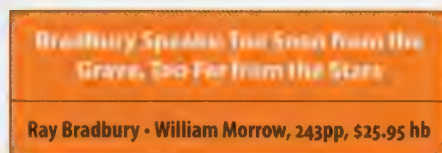
When Anansi dies somewhat publicly in a bar, the repercussions on his son and those surrounding him are widespread. Fat Charlie, unaware of his father's true nature, learns that he has a brother and summons him. Spider is, to say the least, less reserved than Fat Charlie and takes him out on a wake in which his world is turned upside down. As Charlie wakes with a hangover, he finds himself in bed with a strange woman, his future mother-in-law downstairs and his brother taking his place both at work and with his fiancée.

Gaiman delivers a wonderful skit on relationships in Wodehousian fashion, with the various partners rarely listening to what the other is really saying. Rather than communicating with each other, each partner often talks at cross purposes, from personal to business conversations. In a series of misunderstandings, the major partners arrive in the Caribbean with murderous results. Anansi and his brother need to deal with their different natures and Charlie finds the girl and himself, to some extent.

Anansi Boys riffs off of *American Gods*, in that Charlie will not accept the truth about his father. As the book is at pains to remind us, Anansi is the tale teller, he spins his creation from words. Whilst the book plays with comedy, it develops neat sidelines with the thriller and ghost story. Gaiman plays with the conventions but they do seem a little creaky

in contrast with the other narrative strands, a touch rushed. Again short stories break the narrative flow, developing the metanarrative.

This book is, in part, about fictions and how we use them to understand the world and our own lives, and is possibly the most metafictional novel Gaiman has written. It is a return to the humour of *Good Omens* and to the forms and *joie de livres* of the Sandman series. It is also the novel of an author continually trying to do something slightly different. *Anansi Boys* has its strengths and weaknesses but that old man is still scuttling around the edge with his infectious laugh, reminding us that we are reading a Story. ■
Iain Emsley



The word essay comes from the French *essayer*, to try, but some people have to try more than others. Ray Bradbury says in his introduction to this collection of his non-fiction that he once took on an essay assignment about life on other worlds, for which he had to do a lot of research, but never again: "Since then I've written essays only when they wake me at dawn and ask to be finished by noon." (ix)

There are 37 such essays in this book, largely written since 1990, and largely published in major US newspapers. There are pieces here on Los Angeles and Paris, on the promise of space travel, on personalities such as Walt Disney, and on Bradbury's varied career in Hollywood.

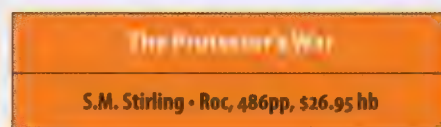
The long piece on Bradbury's time writing the screenplay for John Huston's *Moby Dick* is a good place to start, though it's full of self-dramatisation. Given that Melville wasn't available to do the job, the only solution (Bradbury says) was "To become Herman Melville. Somehow tailor his clothes to your shape and his flesh to your flesh...again and again." (16) He's interesting on the structure of the screenplay, but nowhere is he as specific or evocative as he is in *Banshee*, his short story about the same experience.

A lot of these essays rely on the same devices that weaken the Huston piece: flat one-sentence paragraphs, rhetorical questions, windy hyperbole. Bradbury is also a hell of a namedropper, but with his achievements, he's entitled to be. Looking at the names he drops, though, one realises that he inhabits a curiously woman-free world; apart from his wife, the people he cares about or are worth responding to are overwhelmingly men. So when, in the course of his meeting with Lord (Bertrand) Russell, he's recounting another *Moby Dick* story, it's a delight to hear Lady Russell drop in, "Let us not be too naïve, shall we?" (81)

Ray Bradbury is, more than any other,

the author who ushered me (and, I suspect, millions of others) into reading science fiction. Once in a while in this book, he hits the note that's uniquely his, evoking "those wonderful summer nights when we filled the sky with rockets and fire balloons" (6). But for the rest, sadly, the verdict is *could try harder*. ■

Graham Sleight



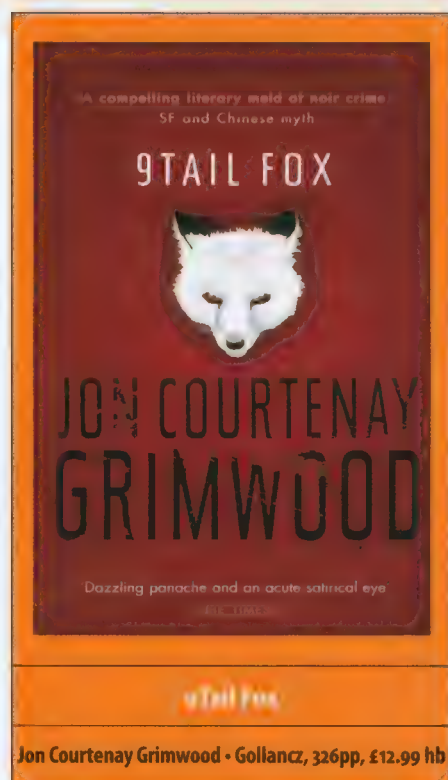
In the 'Island in the Sea of Time' trilogy, Nantucket was sent from 1998 to the Bronze Age. Then, for no real narrative reason, another trilogy was nailed onto it. *Dies The Fire* took the premise that when Nantucket dove back in time, it triggered something very strange throughout the rest of the world. Gas laws, electrical conductivity and pretty much anything to do with explosive properties have been subtly altered. There's some rhetorical guff from two of the characters as they guess at a cause, but it's basically an excuse to wipe out the industrial revolution.

Dies The Fire dealt with the Hobbesian savagery that erupted after the Change, and *The Protector's War* is set eight or nine years later. Stirling chops up the internal time-line to inject some tension that keeps the reader on his toes, even if it does cause one to flick backwards to check chapter headings now and again.

Now to the new world. The main action takes place in the northwest former USA. New states have evolved; one is based on a chivalric system, with a rapidly growing class structure, and is closely allied with a neighbour that is modeled on a New Age pagan belief system. They house our heroes. The threat comes from the Protectorate with a more extreme form of feudalism, and one that's aggressively expansionist. There is much skirmishing, and Stirling is at his best with the poetry of conflict. It's bloodthirsty stuff, but mercifully we are spared a similar depth of detail when our heroes indulge in a mass lynching followed by a picnic. Stirling acknowledges the antecedents here and consciously does his best not to come across as a racist, although his habit of giving every character's racial origins does lead to an uncomfortable moment when we come across the hook-nosed merchant. However, the English characters will raise a smile on the face of any British reader. Ex-SAS man Sir Nigel, for example, has stepped straight from the Raj.

A book not without its pleasures, therefore, although the blood-and-soil romanticism out there will be disappointed that the titular war does not fully materialize. Maybe in the next volume, eh? ■

Jim Steel



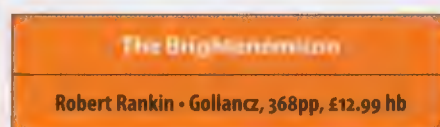
After one set of four novels, and another of three, *9Tail Fox* is only the second of Jon Courtenay Grimwood's stand alones. *9Tail Fox* begins in San Francisco, moves briefly to New York and then returns to San Francisco's Chinatown, and characteristically covers the seedy and the luxurious with very little in between. Sedate suburbia is not one of Grimwood's concerns. Although the novel may be one of Grimwood's best so far, the opening of the tale will be a little too familiar to Grimwood fans: Sergeant Johnny Zha dies in a warehouse, wakes in a new body and sets off to find himself. We get the remaking of Zha into Robert Van Berg (rich coma victim) and flashbacks to a childhood spent between cultures and on 'planes that we've seen before. There is one scene on an aeroplane that feels lifted from *Pashazade* although Grimwood has assured me that no, it was a separate incident he has incorporated.

Once past the first third of the novel, things start to move on and *9Tail Fox* becomes distinctly its own novel. Grimwood has always hovered on the edge of the 'futuristic' thriller and as Robert Van Berg sets out to work out just why he was murdered, and why his rookie partner was complicit, the pace picks up and takes us into the realm of irrational science, and fear of science, which marks the thriller as separate from its SF sibling. Van Berg finds himself on the trail of a Russian icon, not quite sure why its important, and trying to stitch together the impossible acts of a small girl with his own death. This leads him back into the China town of his birth. One way to understand crime novels is as narratives of place: Grimwood explores this only superficially. Although Chinatown is well depicted, and Grimwood clearly demonstrates the difference

between insider and outsider knowledge still, this is not his Iskandria where we could breath the spices that smudged the lines of the page. This sense of distance from the locale may be deliberate. The thriller is also a race against time, and by two thirds of the way in Robert Van Berg has realised he is dying. The eponymous 9 tailed fox visits him twice – the third time will be the last – and Robert/Bobby begins his long goodbye to the city he grew up in, to his daughter and to his new love.

As *9Tailed Fox* draws to a close the treasure at the end of the rainbow is revealed as a nebulous wild goose. Bobby, the Russian secret service, the CIA, everyone has been chasing ghost science. In the final count the 9 tailed fox knows what is important. ■

Farah Mendlesohn



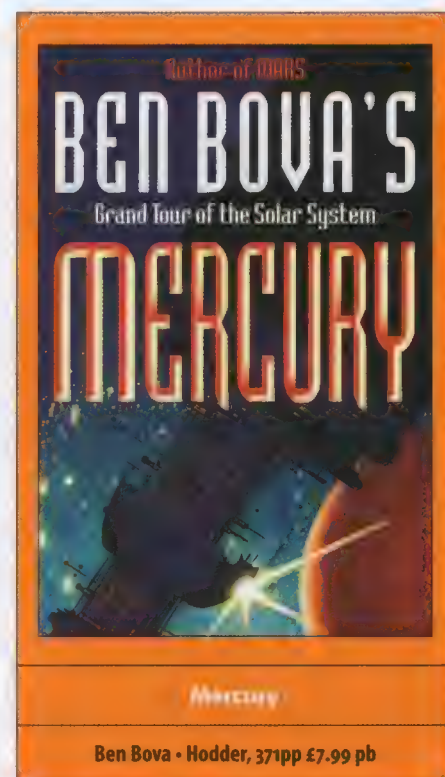
This latest offering from the master of his own particular brand of far-fetched fiction leads us to Brighton, where Hugo Rune ('the Guru's Guru. The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived') is on a quest to find the Chronovision, a television set that acts as a window to the past. To do this, he and his acolyte Rizla (a hapless holiday maker rescued from drowning by Rune) must solve the twelve mysteries of the Brighton Zodiac, including the Lansdown Lioness; a statue of Queen Victoria which weeps tears of Earl Grey and provides a portal for a time travelling robot from 1851, and the Withdean Wiseman; the last living descendant of Jesus Christ. The chapters are even accompanied with a section of map showing how an image of each zodiac character can be projected onto the street layout of Brighton, adding a strange degree of authenticity to Rankin's premise.

As with many Rankin books, there is a feeling here that the flippancy of the running gags and the 'load of old toot' frequently talked by the characters belie a wickedly sharp wit and a logic-bending grasp of storytelling. Science fiction, detective novels and alternate history texts (to mention just a few) are all exuberantly lampooned here, their styles merged with reassuring sleight of hand in places, while being blatantly abused to great effect in others, as when Rizla announces that the only way he can possibly solve the zodiac mysteries is to actually adopt the persona of fictional detective Lazlo Woodbine.

Although initially Rankin's work enjoyed a wider popularity due to the rise of the comic fantasy of writers like Terry Pratchett, *The Brightonomicon* is a great example of the far more eccentric feel he brings to the genre. Littered with intertextual references to both his own work and others, Rankin's books become wittier and more entertaining the more you read them and

certainly deserve a place amongst the important fantasy and SF writers of the moment. For those unfamiliar with the experience, this is as good a place as any to start, and I suggest you do. ■

Sara Ingham



Over the last few years Ben Bova has been making his way around the Solar System in a combination Grand Tour and Future History. His latest port of call is Mercury. Most of what we thought that we knew about the place has turned out to be wrong, except that it certainly is a hellish environment, by any definition of the word.

Most of the characters in *Mercury* have been through hell, nor are they out of it, or are going to enter it.

Earth has long since succumbed to the effects of global warming and all that that entails for those still left on the ravaged planet. It has become vital for Earth to explore the Solar System and harness its resources in all ways possible. After one particularly breathtaking but catastrophic attempt, the disgraced scapegoat plots his revenge. In short punchy chapters, we are led in through the front door, then past around the backstory, and then out front again for the aftermath. It's quite a tour, with a few genuinely interesting set pieces, but it all really is as predictable as a slow courtly dance.

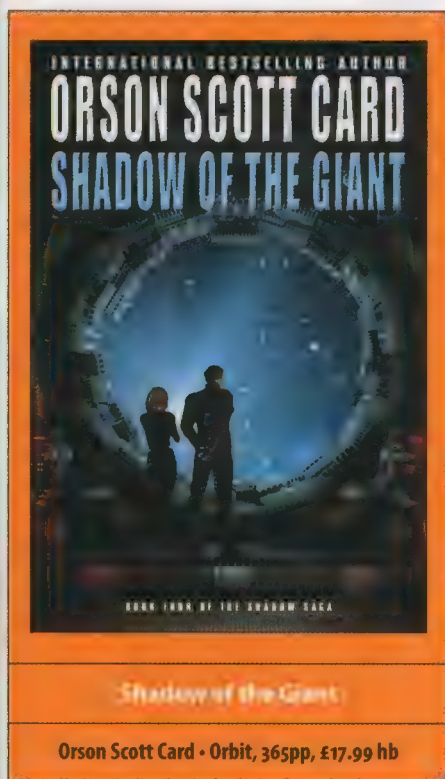
The Yamagatas, father and son, are ruthless corporate capitalists. Dante Alexios is the driven project director, who isn't quite what he seems. Victor Molina is the scientist desperately out to make his reputation. Elliott Danvers is a bishop in the New Morality Movement, spiritual advisor to the Mercury base. All of these people have come together

on Mercury, and all have their Pasts to explain, pay for, atone, redeem, and so on.

Just about every person in *Mercury* comes to no good end, and they take a hell of a time coming even that far, as was once almost said.

The core vision that *Mercury* contains deserves better. It is a distinctly minor part of Ben Bova's Grand Tour of the Solar System. ■

John Howard



With *Shadow of the Giant*, which is either the fourth volume of the Shadow series or the eighth book in the overall Ender series, depending how you're counting, the story of the various Battle School graduates and former members of Ender's 'jeesh' limps to a rather overdue conclusion. Despite the threat of (another) barely averted war between global superpowers, this feels very much like a tying up of loose ends, although one that artfully leaves at least two of the principal protagonists exiled offstage.

The passage of time has not been especially kind to the later Ender books. What was a novel idea in *Ender's Game* (published as Card's first story, 1977, and both a Hugo and Nebula winner in book form in 1985) and its immediate, though not chronological, sequels *Speaker for the Dead* and *Xenocide*, of a pre-teen military genius coming to terms with being the unwitting agent of the extermination of an entire alien race, appears to have developed the same sort of sequelitis (although not by other hands) as Herbert's *Dune* saga or Asimov's *Foundation*.

After a longish pause, Card returned to the Ender sequence in 1999 with *Ender's Shadow*, a 'parallel novel', not so much as sequel but (more in the manner of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*) a view of the events of

the first novel from the perspective of one of the more interesting secondary characters, the preternaturally bright ex street orphan Julian Delphiki, or 'Bean'. With Ender safely offstage (and off Earth) the following books, *Shadow of the Hegemon*, *Shadow Puppets*, concluding here with *Shadow of the Giant*, followed the remaining Battle School pupils and Ender's brother Peter, as they treat the world as a huge game of *Risk!* engaging on grandiose political and military adventures with millions of ordinary people as disposable counters. And this, ultimately, is the bad taste that the Shadow sequels leave behind, an uncritical (even vaguely admiring) examination of the collective madness of a bunch of superbright *überkinder* (one is a psychopathic serial killer, one wants to rule the world, but can't even converse civilly with his parents, another proclaims herself a goddess) as they arbitrarily redraw maps and borders and commit nations to pointless and knowingly doomed wars. This lack of empathy is echoed on a more personal scale by Bean and Petra's kidnapping of their 'lost children', embryos implanted, knowingly or otherwise, and brought to term by surrogate mothers. The moral dilemma of what you can best do for a child with a rare and so-far untreatable illness could have given a much-needed centre to the book. Card ducks, and sweeps the issue offstage for a final resolution that feels like sleight of hand.

These kids may be bright, as they never tire of reminding each other (and us), but as one of the adult characters reminds them, most have yet to develop any moral sensibility.

Politically, as well, *Shadow of the Giant* has the feel of a post 9/11 novel. Even though America – rather stretching credulity for 2020 – no longer regards itself as a major player on the world stage, and has retreated into insularity, Islam is largely cast as a predatory fundamentalist state whose soldiers commit brutal atrocities against civilians (including other Muslims). It is a lapse into stereotype that undermines much of Card's Afterword about the need to understand the complexity of historical forces as much as the action of Great Leaders in *Shadow of the Hegemon*. ■

Steve Jeffery

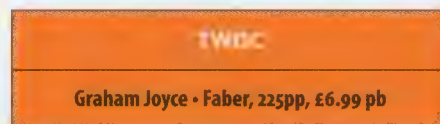


Judith Berman's *Bear Daughter* opens with the surreal, dream-like logic of a fairy-tale: one morning, a bear wakes up as a girl. But her transformation isn't entirely unexpected. Cloud, the bear-turned-girl, is the daughter of a human woman, Thrush, who was kidnapped and forcibly married to a bear god, Lord Stink. Thrush is re-married, now, to her human rescuer, King Rumble, a brutal, powerful man eaten up by jealous rage, who has already murdered her

bear-husband and bear-sons. Rumble has only been restrained from killing Cloud, until now, by the danger of her bearish form. Now that Cloud is a vulnerable twelve-year-old girl, she is finally at his mercy and must spend the rest of the book running from him across the world, while coming to terms with her family's violent, tangled history and the paradoxes of her own half-human, half-bear nature.

Set in a mythical world with overtones of the Pacific Northwest, Cloud's quest is full of vividly-imagined magic and adventure, as well as compelling, realistic emotional drama. Cloud's aching vulnerability is beautifully portrayed, and the first two-thirds of the book have a thrilling narrative momentum and sense of heart-racing emotional urgency. That momentum, unfortunately, does not extend through the entire book; the last third is a slower and less purely exciting read. However, readers who enjoy rich characterisation and lyrical writing will find much to enjoy in Cloud's journey of self-discovery, and Berman's anthropological training bears fruit in the unique and believable fantasy setting of the novel. Readers of her previous chapbook, *Lord Stink and Other Stories*, will be familiar with the back story already, but new readers actually have an advantage in being able to tease it out at the novel's own pace. Filled with mythical wonders and a deep sense of compassion, *Bear Daughter* is a highly original and rewarding fantasy novel. ■

Stephanie Burgis



Matt's brother Jake is looking in the window. He clings to the glass by using his mouth as a suction device. Jake, by the way, is dead and Matt lives on the 12TH floor of a tower block.

Some months after a joyriding accident, 16-year-old Matt is haunted by a dead brother with a penchant for bizarre outfits, including a full drag ensemble. Jake's girlfriend Jools had been hospitalised with serious injuries and left badly scarred. Matt would fancy her anyway, scars and all, but she won't reply to his frequent texts. The high point of his life appears to be visits with a very fanciable probation officer, Sarah. But he can't quite cope when she doesn't wear tights and reveals stubbly legs. This disturbs him almost as much as the visits from Jake.

Matt is sent on a wilderness expedition for young offenders, along with goth fellow-probationer Amy and an acne-ridden 'dork' who is a revered graffiti artist. Matt takes part in some hairy horse-riding, climbing and caving incidents. Further adventures force Matt to confront his past and make new friends; 'Doom-thatch' and 'Chin of Boiling Acne' turn out to be cool after all.

Graham Joyce's first YA book is snappily

written, with sharp dialogue and well-drawn, distinctive characters: sarcky Amy (the one woman besides his mother who Matt *doesn't* fancy), Gilbert the graffiti boy, Sarah and even some dodgy staff members at the expedition centre called Cookie and Bone. Only Matt's unobtainable lust object Debbie doesn't make much impression – I'm not even sure what she looked like.

The book hurtles along enjoyably and makes compelling reading. It can be very funny, yet doesn't use humour to avoid the dark and discomfiting. Perhaps the final lesson-learning is just a little too neat, surprising in a Joyce book. It made me consider why *TWOC* is YA but *The Tooth Fairy*, an earlier novel with a teenaged male narrator, is considered 'adult fiction'.

However, not everything is resolved. Despite those lessons learned Matt still has a lot more growing up to do. I was left thinking that he really needs to get over that little hang-up about unshaven legs! ■

Rosanne Rabinowitz



Double Vision, like *Maul*, contains two stories. This time around they do not, for the most part, interact in the way that made the earlier novel so memorable. Instead, the relationship between them – between the absorbing, shifting, battle-scarred landscape of the Grid, and a small town in South Dakota in the 1980s – is one of reflection and refraction, and creates a book that is, perhaps above all else, about being stuck in the system.

The conduit is Cookie Orbach: shy, overweight, black, 30-something, possibly psychic, possibly a little crazy. She works for Dataplex, a mysterious corporation who

pay her to serve as a remote observer in the Grid. In her spare time, Cookie reads Anne McCaffrey novels and attempts to learn judo. In less skillful hands, she could easily have been a caricature – the damaged but miraculously talented outcast – but Sullivan makes her complex and ambiguous, a challenge to the idea of the weirdo as hero.

Cookie's life is, at least initially, defined by an almost pathological passivity, but when she realises her employers are not what they seem, her struggle to assert control over her life – or even to conceptualise how and why she wants it to change – is involving. The mechanism for this is the Grid. It isn't just Cookie's job: it is, in a strong sense, her inner world, the ultimate in showing-not-telling, dramatising her dilemmas as literal conflicts. One of the book's arguments is therefore that escapism can be valuable, or even necessary. And yet, it's more complicated than that. The possibly-alien, possibly-virtual Grid is not metaphorical in one dimension, but in many.

Perhaps this explains why the mundane sections of *Double Vision* sometimes seem flat. The Grid may be less real, but it is much richer. It is, for example, not for nothing that the story takes place in 1984 – a resonant year for a story about oppression and control to begin with, but especially powerful when the book is considered as either cyberpunk (one route by which Cookie enters the Grid is to watch television tuned to a dead channel) or as feminist SF (the soldiers in the grid are all women, and all part of the 'second wave'). Further, this is a book that is profoundly distrustful of consumer culture. Brand names are pervasive in Cookie's real world, and erased or transformed in the Grid; if the Grid represents, in part, human imagination, the subversion of the same through advertising and marketing is a sickness.

Double Vision fades towards the end – whereas in *Maul* the final chapter was a vertiginous expansion of possibility, here there is an unwelcome suspicion that a sequel is being prepared – and is damaged by some irritating typographical choices. Sullivan's exploration of how social and economic systems limit our choices, however, is ambitious, and deserves attention. In this book, there are no single, simple causes – and in that, tangled as it may be, there is truth. ■

Niall Harrison

Gravity Wells

James Alan Gardner • Eos, 368pp, \$15.95 pb

James Alan Gardner has fun with his story titles. In fact, he generally seems to have fun with his stories, full stop, and ranges easily across the entire speculative landscape. 'Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large,'

for instance, is an enjoyable, Lafferty-esque story about a six-year old girl who knows an improbably large amount about the Purpose of Things. By contrast 'Withered Gold, The Night, The Day' is a vampire story, set in a world where pervasive corruption is undermining the order of things; and 'The Children of Creche' is a traditional SF mystery, involving a group of colonists rendered sterile by the planet they inhabit, presented as a flamboyantly written piece of magazine journalism.

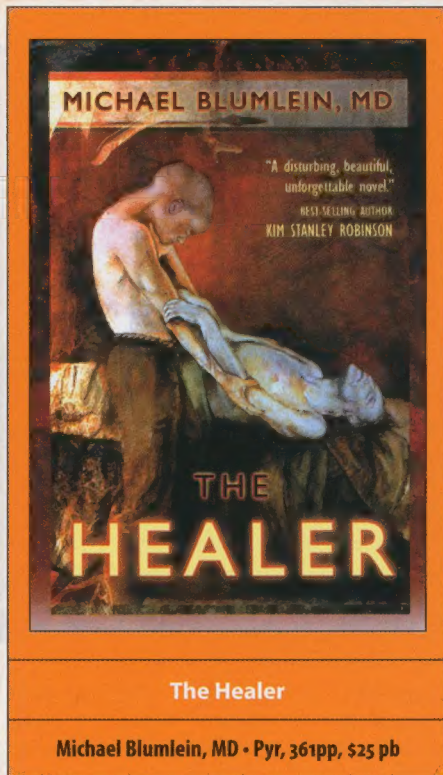
Most of the stories are fun for the reader, too, and a number of them are funny. Humour is a subjective thing, and a tricky thing, and though for the most part Gardner has a deft touch, some of the breezier stories fall flat. 'The Children of Creche' works because the humour serves the story: Gardner uses it to make a number of points about Art and Criticism. By contrast, pieces like 'A Changeable Market in Slaves' and 'Hardware Scenario G-49' feel thin. The book's final story, however, makes the earlier misfires forgivable. 'Sense of Wonder' is a transcript of a conversation between two teenage boys. It's about daydreams and Dyson spheres and love. Gardner's idle banter is perfect, and the whole is more poignant than you might expect.

The best stories in the book are those in which Gardner keeps his sense of the absurd under control, or channels his inventiveness in other ways. Many of the stories, like 'Sense of Wonder', are not conventional narratives. 'Shadow Album' is a melancholy examination of the damage that can be caused by obsession and self-indulgent love, captured in a series of photographs, while 'The Young Person's Guide to the Organism' is a strong novella that uses the same basic theme-and-variations structure as Benjamin Britten's 'Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra' to tell a first-contact story from almost twenty different perspectives. 'Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream' is a blunt but effective alternate history that examines how scientific truths can be employed in support of ideology.

And the collection's standout story is made of fragments, and deconstructs itself as it goes along. 'Kent State Descending the Gravity Well: An Analysis of the Observer' is an exploration of how fiction can (or can't) deal with tragedy without trivialising it. The narrator considers and discards various sf scenarios that might enable stories to be set around May 4, 1970, when the Ohio State National Guard opened fire on student demonstrators protesting against the Vietnam War. The title of the story comes, as the narrator puts it, "from a mathematics thesis whose math had leaked away, leaving behind only metaphors." It is the most effective showcase, in a collection of solid work, for Gardner's canny understanding of what sf is and how it works. ■

Niall Harrison

MICHAEL BLUMLEIN, MD



In a strange world that may or may not be our own, mankind co-exists with the Grotesques, or Tesques for short. While some suspect a common ancestry, the asymmetrical Tesques are a despised underclass. A few are valued as healers, though even these are little more than slaves, taken away from their families and trained to use their abilities, but only for the benefit of humans. Eventually they are exhausted by a condition known as the Drain, and sent to live out what time remains to them as beggars. The act of healing itself, to simplify somewhat, consists of the healer absorbing the illness of the human patient into his own body and then expelling it as a concretion, a lump of waste matter, through an orifice peculiar to Tesques.

Payne may be unique, the first healer immune to the effects of the Drain. He works at the remote mining settlement of Pannus, and then in the gambling city of Aksagetta, eventually ending up at Rampart, where he can treat the most challenging illnesses and tend to the needs of the human elite. Along the way Payne learns more of his abilities, their scope and limitations, formulates his own theories about the nature of healing, toys with religion and a revolutionary movement, though finding both wanting. He also discovers that there is more to the concretions than previously suspected. And all the while Payne's life is being channelled and watched over by a guardian angel, a woman high in the ranks of the ruling class who has an agenda of her own, one in which his involvement is essential.

The Healer is a fascinating and multi-layered novel in which Blumlein creates a strange and intriguing version of reality, with a complex social system built along rigid caste lines and

smaller groups operating within this milieu. He excels in depicting the attitudes of these insular communities and social groupings, their rules and taboos, such as the mining community at Pannus, the congregation of the Church For Giveness and the Tesque revolutionary group, and then having them interact with Payne, who is essentially *Candide*, an innocent abroad, unable to fit in anywhere, constantly questioning the ways of those around him and finding them wanting. Blumlein uses this set up to hold a mirror up to our own world, addressing matters of prejudice and healing, faith and individual responsibility, through the medium of Payne evolving his own personal philosophy, a codification of the world and his unique place in it.

And yet, worthy as the enterprise is, it is also at times somewhat obvious and unsubtle, as for instance in having the Tesques as an underclass representing all of society's outcasts. There is nothing here that is controversial, and the conclusions Payne reaches are not so different from views held by most people with a liberal mindset. While previous acquaintance with Blumlein – the stories he published in early issues of *Interzone*, 'The Brains of Rats' and 'Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration: A Case Report' – led me to expect something more polemical and challenging, this novel will, I suspect, only affirm the values of the audience at which it is so obviously pitched.

Despite the wealth of fascinating detail and incidental invention, the book's backdrop doesn't quite convince, with too many loose ends left hanging and too much that seems like plot convenience, while much is simply left ambiguous to no good effect, such as the nature of the concretions. The ending, with its mock Biblical overtones, as the previously realistic narrative segues into a hallucinogenic and quasi-mythological happy ever after, just seems like a cop out, as if the writer didn't really know where to go with the story.

Much of which might suggest I didn't enjoy the book, and that would be wide of the mark as generally I found it excellent, with plenty to absorb and deserving of commendation, such as the elegant prose style and the wholly convincing characterisation, plus all the qualities I listed earlier. Blumlein knows how to tell a story and how to hold a reader's attention. Only in the bigger picture does he disappoint, with the wood too often lost among the trees. ■

Peter Tennant

Soundings: Reviews 1992–1996

Gary K. Wolfe • Becon Publications, 415pp, £15 pb

Soundings is Gary Wolfe's first collection of reviews. It covers the first five years of his tenure as a regular reviewer for *Locus*, 1992 to 1996, and brings together 60 monthly columns

(plus five end-of-year overviews) that consider over 200 books from nearly 150 authors and editors. SF was and is too big to be captured by one person's perspective – as Wolfe himself points out several times in his reviews of various Year's Best anthologies, we are all just blind men feeling different parts of the elephant – but *Soundings* nevertheless paints an extensive, interesting, sometimes eclectic collage of the field in the early nineties.

Wolfe's reviews are characteristically both perceptive and entertaining. He is extremely good at offering concise evaluations, and has a keen eye for the important details that mark an author's focus, coupled with a wry, dry wit that makes his writing a pleasure to read. Greg Egan, for example, has "such a talent for playing with ideas that it's almost a shame he has to tell a story" (340), while Richard Calder is "onto something, all right, and he may need counselling to get off it." (266). Throughout, the reviews are notably focused on the specific qualities of their subjects; Wolfe does not usually suggest the kind of grand rhetorical constructs that, say, John Clute regularly offers.

This, however, does not stop Wolfe's reviews offering thoughtful and wide-ranging commentary on SF as a field and as a form. In many ways, *Soundings* is a book that is perfect for dipping into; each column is a few thousand words in length, but most offer a perspective that you'll want to turn over in your head a few times before moving on. When reviewing Stephen Baxter's *Ring*, for example, he notes that the real strength of hard SF is "not connecting science with literature, but science with imagination, of which literature is only one aspect" (216). Some of the most interesting reviews are those given to anthologies, such as Ursula Le Guin and Brian Attebery's infamous *Norton Book of Science Fiction*, or David Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer's *Ascent of Wonder*; such books give Wolfe an opportunity to really explore the size and shape of his subject.

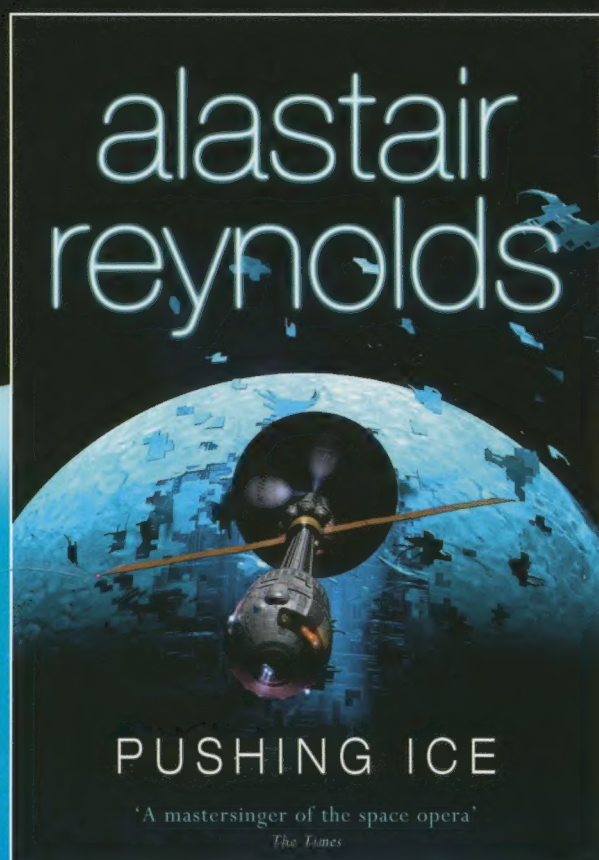
The limitations of the reviews in *Soundings* are largely limitations of the format within which Wolfe is working. Occasionally it seems as though a book is crying out for a more extended treatment, and that a review stops just as it's really starting to get interesting; and although Wolfe is certainly prepared to be critical where appropriate, he states in his introduction that the books he reviews are the books he considers worth talking about. Whether there are some books that *need* to be talked about is an unasked question, and an upshot is that if you read too much of the book in a single sitting the nuances of Wolfe's generally-positive assessments can be lost. Nevertheless, when I turned the final page I was left with the urge to go and read more books. And perhaps that's the highest praise a reviewer can earn. ■

Niall Harrison

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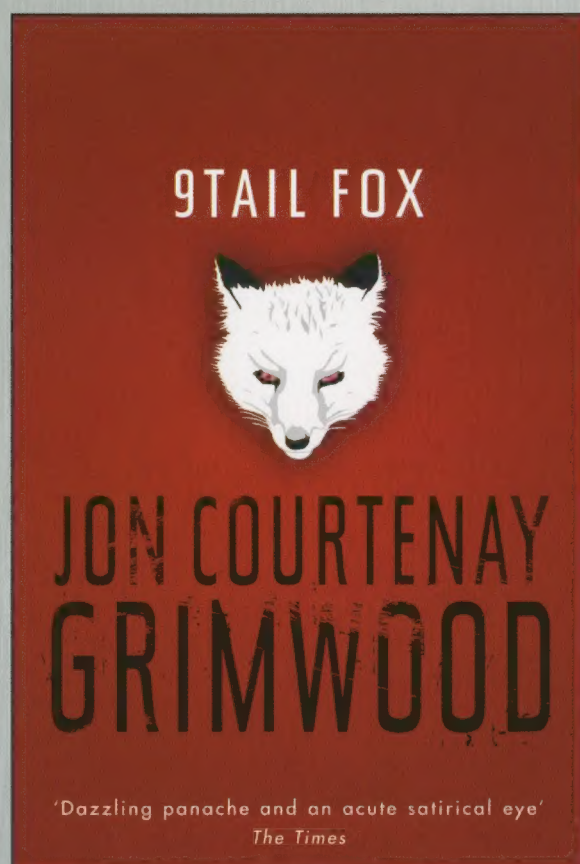


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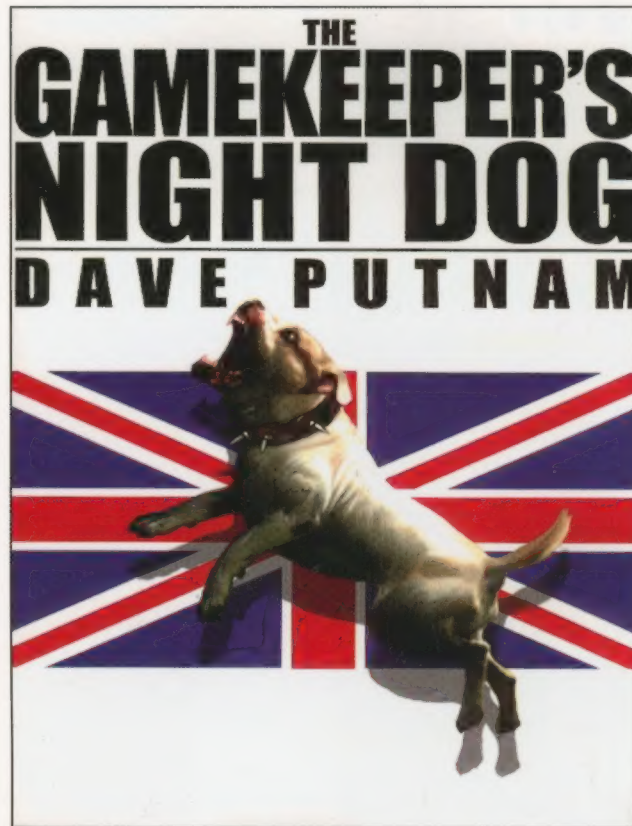
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All four novels are available on Amazon.com or www.workingamericanbulldog.com